

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay &  
Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury

# CASTE & PARTITION *in* BENGAL

*The Story of  
Dalit Refugees,  
1946–1961*



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*The Story of Dalit Refugees, 1946–1961*

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*For  
the Dalit refugees from East Bengal,  
who lost everything due to Partition,  
and suffered immeasurably,  
due to no fault of their own.*

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## Abbreviations

AICC	All India Congress Committee
AISCF	All India Scheduled Castes Federation
CA	Constituent Assembly
CM	Chief Minister
CPI	Communist Party of India
CPI(M)	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
DDA	Dandakaranya Development Authority
EIRC	East India Refugee Council
GI	Government of India
IB	Intelligence Branch
IOR	India Office Records
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly
MM	Matua Mahasangha
MP	Member of Parliament
NAI	National Archive of India
NMML	Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
PSP	Praja Socialist Party
RCPI	Revolutionary Communist Party of India
RSP	Revolutionary Socialist Party
SBBS	Sara Bangla Bastuhara Sammelan
SC	Scheduled Caste
UCRC	United Central Refugee Council
WBLAP	West Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings
WPCC	West Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee
WBSA	West Bengal State Archive

# Introduction

## Partition and Caste

Caste as an analytical category is seldom introduced into the discussion of Partition of India in 1947. In conventional narratives of Partition, the Muslim League and the Indian National Congress are presented as the two main players, and the Partition-related violence is assumed to be primarily between the Hindus and the Sikhs on one side and the Muslims on the other. All internal differentiations within these groups, based on gender, caste, or region, are collapsed to present the two contending groups as homogenous subcontinental categories representing two distinct social and eventually political identities. If the gender imbalance in this historiography has now been rectified to some extent,<sup>1</sup> many other voices still remain silent. The role of the Scheduled Castes (SCs)—or Dalit, as many of them, would prefer to call themselves today—and their organisation, the All India Scheduled Castes Federation (AISCF) is either completely ignored or mentioned only in passing in this extant literature. As Urvasi Butalia has reminded us: ‘In its almost exclusive focus on Hindus and Sikhs and Muslims, Partition history has worked to render many others invisible. One such history is that of the scheduled castes, or untouchables.’<sup>2</sup> Bengal witnessed powerful Dalit movements during the colonial period, resisting caste-based discriminatory practices,<sup>3</sup> but we do not know why they almost completely disappeared after the Partition. Was it because of Partition politics? Then, after the Partition, we witnessed endless streams of refugees coming into West Bengal, and among them were many Dalit peasants. Their different experiences of migration and resettlement remain largely unrecognised. This book seeks to address this discursive absence of the caste question and the Dalit from the long history of Partition in Bengal.

We use the word Dalit with caution, as we acknowledge that the word was never used in Bengal during the period we are studying, i.e. 1946–61. Even today, some of the members of the SCs do not use the word for self-description and would resent others using it to identify them. The term, first used in Maharashtra and popularised by Dr B.R. Ambedkar, meant ‘ground down’, ‘broken to pieces’, or ‘crushed’. In the course of the early twentieth century, this pejorative term was re-signified with a different meaning and was made into a marker of a new positive and assertive identity of protest.<sup>4</sup> While the term was not

used in Bengal, similar movements of self-assertion to claim separate political status for the SCs as a minority were significantly present here in the late colonial period. And more recently, some inheritors of that legacy very consciously use the term Dalit for self-description as well as for organising their political, and more importantly, a powerful literary movement.<sup>5</sup> After the establishment of the Dalit Sahitya Academy by the West Bengal government in late 2020, the term has acquired further legitimacy. Following that tradition, we have consciously used the term in our study, as it more appropriately signals the structural location of the people whose history we will tell. Here, Dalit and the politically neutral official term Scheduled Caste or SC have been used interchangeably. We have consciously avoided the Gandhian term Harijan, which the Dalit find condescending.

The story that we are going to tell stands at the intersection of two strands in Indian historiography—the history of Partition and the history of Dalit movements. So far as Partition historiography is concerned, the Dalit rarely figure in that history; only a few studies have indicated that the Partition precipitated a ‘crisis’ for the Dalit movements in both Punjab and Bengal, and their leaders were forced to take sides in Partition politics.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the histories of Dalit movements rarely take into account the impact of Partition on their trajectories—except for only a few publications in recent years.<sup>7</sup>

The disappearance of the Dalit from Partition history is possibly due to two reasons. Firstly is their relative invisibility in the Partition archives—records of the colonial state, documents of the mainstream political parties, newspapers, even the rich Partition literature rarely mention the Dalit as a distinctly recognisable group of participants in the events of this period. This invisibility of the Dalit possibly arises from another factor. It has been claimed that the Dalit in north India, particularly in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh, did not actively identify with Hindu nationalism or Congress-led movements and instead asserted their distinctive social and political identity in the late colonial period, they did not become targets of Muslim violence, except by accident. Therefore, the Partition did not concern them.<sup>8</sup> For eastern India, Joya Chatterji’s *Bengal Divided* (1995) showed that the SCs were involved in the unfolding political drama that led to Partition, but only as minor actors in a story that was dominated by the Hindu *bhadralok* (or the upper-caste elite).<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, Partha Chatterjee has argued that the Dalit played no role in this play, as the decision to partition Bengal was made at the top and from New Delhi.<sup>10</sup>

However, the role of the Dalit in the Partition politics has in recent years drawn more attention of historians. Ravinder Kaur, while studying the experiences of Partition refugees from Punjab, observed

that the ‘untouchable groups were neither untouched by nor isolated from the Partition-related events’.<sup>11</sup> And this issue of Partition, Ishtiaq Ahmed showed, had deeply divided the SC leadership in Punjab.<sup>12</sup> In Bengal too, a similar situation prevailed, as Sekhar Bandyopadhyay indicated in the second edition of his book on the Namasudras and in an earlier article in 2009.<sup>13</sup> Dwaipayan Sen in his recent book<sup>14</sup> has also addressed the caste question. Focusing primarily on the role of Jogendranath Mandal, who in 1943 had established the Bengal branch of the AISCF, he looks at what happened to the Dalit in those final years of British rule and thereafter. He holds the Congress and upper-caste machinations responsible for the marginalisation and subsequent victimisation of the Dalit in Bengal during and after the Partition. While Congress was certainly no real friend of Dalit, the politics of this period and Dalit involvement in it had more complexities and more actors than we usually recognise. Anriban Bandyopadhyay has also critically looked at Dalit politics in Bengal in those crucial years of 1945–46. But he focuses more on Ambedkar’s election to the Constituent Assembly (CA) from the Bengal Legislative Assembly, than on Partition politics as a whole.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, Ghazal Asif has looked at the immediate post-Partition period. In a recent essay based on archives in Pakistan, he has cast a critical glance at Jogendranath Mandal’s role as a Minister in the Pakistani central cabinet between 1947 and 1950 and has analysed the reasons behind his eventual resignation and migration.<sup>16</sup>

There is yet another evolving strand in Partition historiography. In recent years, it has been acknowledged that the Partition of India was not just an event that happened in August 1947—it had a long afterlife. The historiography of Partition, therefore, has shifted its focus from a preoccupation with its causes and the allocation of blame to an increasing interest in recovering the experiences of its victims, as those experiences had profound consequences for the subsequent nation-building processes and communal relations in the subcontinent. In Gyanendra Pandey’s words, the ‘“truth” of the partition’ lay in the violence it produced; he has therefore endeavoured to unravel how this violence was ‘conceptualised and remembered by those who lived through partition—as victims, aggressors or onlookers’.<sup>17</sup> A series of studies have followed since then, focussing mainly on the refugees in Punjab<sup>18</sup> and Bengal,<sup>19</sup> exploring their experiences of violence and displacement, their struggle for citizenship, the politics about their rehabilitation, and the impact of the memories of Partition violence on communal relations in the subcontinent. But only a few works so far have mentioned that the Dalit for being Dalit experienced this displacement, migration, and rehabilitation in very different ways.

For the West Punjabi Dalit refugees, Ravinder Kaur has now

recorded the story of their different treatment and resettlement in 'separate refugee camps, separate mass housing schemes' in the outskirts of Delhi.<sup>20</sup> Akanksha Kumar has shown how the Dalit refugees belonging to the Megh community of Sialkot remembered their experiences of Partition violence, migration to Jalandhar under military escort, and settlement in a refugee colony specially set up for such refugees.<sup>21</sup> But unlike Punjab, the Dalit in East Bengal did not migrate immediately after the Partition. The refugees in Bengal came in waves over a long period. The first wave of East Bengali refugees who came to West Bengal in 1947–48 consisted mostly of upper-caste *bhadralok*, mainly government employees who opted for posting in West Bengal, and landowners who could arrange exchanges of properties. This group included some educated SC middle classes as well. But the Dalit peasants of East Bengal (until 1956, East Pakistan was called East Bengal) did not migrate at this stage, as they lacked social and financial capital to move. And the level of violence in 1947 in Bengal was not intense enough to force their migration. Moreover, the AISCF in East Bengal believed in the Dalit–Muslim alliance and advised its followers not to migrate to India, where they would not get justice from a *savarna* (upper caste) Hindu-dominated Congress government. Their leader Jogendranath Mandal became the Chairman of the Pakistan CA and later joined the Pakistan central cabinet. But this alliance broke down after the riots of 1950, after which came the second wave of refugees, who were mostly peasants belonging to Dalit castes like Namasudra, Paundra, and Rajbansi, and some *adivasis* like Santhals. Prime Minister Nehru thought that this migration could be stopped and reversed if communal relations could be improved in the two Bengals. For this purpose, he signed the Delhi Pact in April 1950 with his Pakistani counterpart, Liaquat Ali Khan. But by now, in the East Bengal countryside, the Dalit–Muslim alliance had broken down in such a way that it could not be easily repaired. Therefore, this Dalit peasant migration continued until the border was sealed in 1957.

But since these Dalit peasants did not migrate immediately after 1947—as their counterparts did in Punjab—they never appeared as a distinct social group in the history of Partition refugees in Bengal. While in some of the earlier literature, the arrival of a large number of Dalit refugees was noted, their subsequent struggle for citizenship and rehabilitation—which was evidently more difficult than that of the *savarna* refugees—was rarely acknowledged, as they were all incorporated into the wider portmanteau category of 'refugee'. Their distinctive voices, therefore, remained inaudible; the different experiences that this particular group of refugees endured for being Dalit remained unknown to us—until recently. In the last few years, we had some very interesting work on Dalit refugees.

Among the earlier works on refugees in Bengal mentioned above, Prafulla Chakrabarti's *The Marginal Men* (1990), Nilanjana Chatterjee's doctoral thesis (1992), Joya Chatterji's classic *The Spoils of Partition* (2007), and more recently, Anindita Ghoshal's *Refugees, Borders and Identities* (2021)<sup>22</sup> mentioned the presence of a large number of SC peasants among the refugees who arrived in the 1950s and populated the refugee camps. But in the narratives of their struggle for rehabilitation and agitations against the state the caste factor did not get any separate mention. Haimanti Roy's book recognised that these refugees were not an 'undifferentiated mass', and our study draws significant insights from her work. But she kept the discussion of their struggle for citizenship at a fairly general level, differentiated by their time of arrival, rather than by the social groups they belonged to.<sup>23</sup> Abhijit Dasgupta's recent book has a long chapter on the SC refugees in post-Partition West Bengal.<sup>24</sup> This excellent chapter provides a wealth of information on the official refugee policies of the Government of India (GI) and the plight of the SC refugees in the camps, and we have extensively used the findings of his research in our analysis. But he does not deal with the earlier Partition politics, nor focuses on the caste question in particular, and does not relate the struggle of the East Bengali Dalit refugees to their politics of identity. Debjani Sengupta's book<sup>25</sup> also deals with the Dalit refugees in the camps and their journey to Dandakaranya, but primarily through their literary representations in Bengali fiction.

More recently, Udit Sen's book has critically looked at the history of refugee rehabilitation in eastern India, arguing that from the very beginning, this issue in West Bengal was trapped in a discourse of development, demography, and resources, treating the refugees as 'unwanted additions to the existing problem of overpopulation', creating problems for the resource-strapped economy of the state.<sup>26</sup> We agree with her prime argument about state policies prioritising development over rehabilitation. Her book focuses on the Dalit refugees and shows how the state's attitude to them began to change after 1954, when it discovered that they were cheap labour that could be used for different development projects. It discusses how some of them settled in the Andaman Islands, where they eventually thrived as pioneer cultivators. Thus, the book interrogates the familiar linear narrative of refugee victimhood and complements our narrative, as the story of refugee settlement in Andaman is only briefly mentioned in our book. Related to this discussion is Anwesha Sengupta's work, particularly her two essays where she discusses the issue of the dispersal of Dalit refugees. She also argues that what lay behind this policy was the state's determination to use these refugees as productive labour for different development projects, such as the

settlement of the Andaman Islands and the Dandakaranya project.<sup>27</sup> The story of refugee settlement in Andaman has also been dealt with by Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury, and more recently, by Madhumita Mazumdar and Carola Erika Lorea.<sup>28</sup>

But while the Andaman story is well-researched, for understanding the conditions in Dandakaranya and knowing the experiences of the Dalit refugees in those remote, uninhabitable lands, we still have to depend mostly on the writings of Shaibal Kumar Gupta, recently edited by Alok Ghosh, and the articles by Ghosh and Gyanesh Kudaisya. All these studies show that the project was ill-conceived, poorly executed, and rehabilitation of the East Bengali refugees was not its only primary objective.<sup>29</sup> This familiar negative story of Dandakaranya has recently been re-examined by Subhasri Ghosh in her 2017 article, in which she sought to present a more 'nuanced narrative of the Dandakaranya scenario'. Those who could brave the initial hardship of settlement, she argues based on her oral interviews, did well to start a new life in Dandakaranya. Many of them, however, still nurture bitter memories of those initial days of struggle. Although she mentions that the majority of those who settled in Dandakaranya were Namasudras, she does not foreground the caste factor in her discussion.<sup>30</sup> The other recent book in Bengali by Babul Kumar Pal focuses on the Dalit peasant refugees in Dandakaranya, and also paints a similar picture of the initial days of adversity and maladministration, followed by phases of adjustment, settlement, and progress.<sup>31</sup>

Among the other more recent publications on the East Bengali refugees, Jayanti Basu's book provides psychoanalysis of the memories of violence recounted by mainly upper-caste refugees from Calcutta.<sup>32</sup> The book that focuses on Dalit camp refugees and brings in a wealth of information from the archives is the most recently published one by Swati Sengupta Chatterjee.<sup>33</sup> We acknowledge our debt to her, as we have extensively used information from her book to buttress our own argument. We have also used valuable oral history evidence collected from refugee camps by Subhasree Ghosh and Debjani Datta,<sup>34</sup> as well as by Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury and Ishita Dey.<sup>35</sup> There are now a few theoretical studies on refugee camps, from which we have derived valuable analytical insights.<sup>36</sup> And apart from the camp refugees, other migrants self-rehabilitated in the border districts. On them, apart from Willem van Schendel's work, *The Bengal Borderland* (2005), we now have two recent studies—by Tetsuya Nakatani on Nadia and Manosanto Biswas on the 24-Parganas.<sup>37</sup> Their empirical findings also support the argument that we are going to present.

Thus, the history of Partition and Dalit refugees in Bengal does not anymore represent uncharted territory. In this book, we do not

propose to offer any ‘revisionist’ view of history, as we use theoretical insights and empirical information from the research of previous scholars who have written on the subject before us. We build on their works. However, the main difference that our book represents vis-a-vis many of the publications mentioned above is its central focus on the ‘caste question’ and ‘Dalit refugees’ in the discussion of Partition politics, migration, and rehabilitation in West Bengal. ‘Caste’ as a discursive category is rigorously and consciously introduced into the discussion of Partition and the received wisdom on Dalit position on Partition is interrogated, their experience of migration and rehabilitation re-examined.

## Dalit in Partition

In this book we present empirical evidence to argue that in Bengal, the Dalit were neither passive onlookers nor accidental victims of Partition politics and violence. As a result of their participation in this politics, the unity of their movement was ruptured, and they lost their political autonomy. They responded to the situation in diverse ways. One group of Dalit leaders, led by Mandal, was opposed to Partition and believed that a Dalit–Muslim alliance was in the best interest of the Dalit. But there was also another powerful group led by Pramatha Ranjan Thakur—popularly known as P.R. Thakur—who got closer to Congress and Hindu nationalism and demanded the Partition of Bengal, when it seemed imminent that the whole of Bengal might go to Pakistan. Many Dalit peasants and urban workers in Bengal were caught up in this political vortex and became both victims and perpetrators of violence.

While dealing with the aftermath of Partition, we argue that the ‘refugee’ was not a monolithic category. Although united by the shared pain of displacement, they were differentiated by experiences of rehabilitation. The *savarna bhadralok* refugees, who came before 1950 with considerable amounts of cultural and social capital, were comparatively better treated by the Indian state. They were considered to be ‘assets’, and their rehabilitation was prioritised over that of the Dalit peasants who came in the 1950s. The latter group was seen as a ‘burden’ for a frail economy of West Bengal, and their rehabilitation became an issue of intense political debate. In the end, the Indian state did not provide the Dalit refugees with the proper rehabilitation package that they expected and deserved.

Some of these displaced Dalit peasants rehabilitated themselves through their own initiatives in the border districts of Nadia and 24-Parganas, in many cases by forcibly displacing the local Muslims. Others who sought state assistance were first temporarily



accommodated in fenced refugee camps, where life was less than pleasant. It was after 1954 that the GI began to think about the permanent rehabilitation of these predominantly Dalit agriculturist refugees. But its policy was based on a false premise that there was no excess arable land in West Bengal where these peasants could be resettled. At the same time, there was also a policy, as Udit Sen and Anwesha Sengupta have forcefully argued, of using their labour and agricultural expertise to promote development projects in areas where they were most needed. And so, they were dispersed to other parts of India, first to the Andaman Islands and the neighbouring states of Bihar and Orissa, and then to the inhospitable terrains of Dandakaranya, which fell into the two states of Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. Dalit memory in West Bengal recalls that before Partition, Gandhi and Nehru had promised them proper rehabilitation in post-Partition India if they were forced to migrate from their original habitat. The Indian state clearly reneged on that promise when the time came to fulfil it in the 1950s. As a result of this dispersal—which seemed like a second displacement—a large section of the Dalit population of Bengal lost their natural cultural home and were scattered across the Indian subcontinent, losing their linguistic and social identity, but more importantly, losing their spatial capacity to mobilise and agitate for their rights of equal citizenship. In these states, they do not even enjoy the SC status and the constitutional privileges that come with it.

In this story of Dalit peasant refugees of Bengal, there is yet another sub-plot of being let down not only by Congress, but by all other *bhadralok*-dominated opposition political parties, which this book seeks to highlight. The Dalit refugees did not leave Bengal without a fight. They were not unwilling to go outside Bengal, but they were particularly averse to the Dandakaranya dispersal scheme, as conditions there were not yet fit for human habitation. Their resistance to forced dispersal arose from the grassroots level through the Bastuhara Samitis at the camp level. But the Dalit leaders in the camps, being locked in a fenced space with an extremely adverse relationship of power, needed the mediation and support of the mainstream political parties in order to make an impact on provincial and national politics. Hence came to their support the United Central Refugee Council (UCRC) dominated by the Communist Party of India (CPI), and the Sara Bangla Bastuhara Sammelan (SBBS) controlled by the Praja Socialist Party (PSP). With this support, in 1958, the camp refugees launched a major *satyagraha* campaign that brought civic life in the central business district of Calcutta to a state of paralysis. The Congress government in the state under Dr B.C. Roy buckled under pressure and promised not to send them to Dandakaranya without

their consent. But later, the central government—also a Congress government—disregarded that promise and forcibly sent them off to Dandakaranya to quickly close down the camps, which were causing continuous drainage of money.

The refugee movement from now on tended to become restive and radical, and the mainstream political support from the Left gradually disappeared or became lukewarm, as the Bengali *bhadralok* evidently became unsympathetic to these rustic Dalit immigrants disrupting public life in Calcutta. Jogendranath Mandal, at this time, organised his own East India Refugee Council (EIRC) exclusively for Dalit refugees. At this stage, he moved to the right and aligned with the Hindu Mahasabha leaders, who also wanted a share of the refugee constituency. But by 1961, he too had to abandon his movement, as by this time, all political parties across the spectrum seemed to have come to an unspoken consensus that the dispersal of the Dalit peasant refugees was the right solution for their ongoing rehabilitation problem. All these opposition parties at this stage gradually withdrew their support for the refugee movement and practically abandoned the Dalit refugees, who felt betrayed as they were packed off to Dandakaranya, where there was still no sufficient infrastructure for human habitation. This book brings out the differences between the Dalit leaders of the camps and the mainly middle-class *bhadralok* leadership of the mainstream opposition political parties, which not only tried to suppress the caste question in the interest of a larger refugee unity but ultimately let down the Dalit refugee movement in Bengal. While some Leftist leaders kept the dream alive in the minds of the Dalit refugees for resettlement in Bengal, there was no honest initiative to help them. This only resulted in a massive act of betrayal, mayhem, and death in Marichjanpi in 1978–79.

The book argues that the caste question did not decline in post-Partition West Bengal, but only temporarily disappeared from the public political space, largely due to the displacement and dispersal of a large segment of its Dalit population, who were supposed to articulate it. The Namasudra community of East Bengal, who once provided—more than any other SC caste, except the Rajbansis of north Bengal—the leadership and support-base for the autonomous Dalit protests in late colonial Bengal, now became ‘refugees’. Their struggle for justice was now for rehabilitation and citizenship, and it required different idioms of articulation. This did not mean either decline or resolution of the caste question, as this question was at the very heart of this story of struggle and betrayal. An overwhelming majority of these camp refugees belonged to Dalit groups—more than 70 per cent of them—and their identity as Dalit peasants was crucial as it compounded their suffering. Their old (Dalit) and new (refugee)

identities converged in their new movement for justice, demanding proper rehabilitation—not as an act of kindness from the state, but as a matter of right as citizens. It represented—to borrow a term from Ranabir Samaddar—the ‘double world’ of Dalit consciousness,<sup>38</sup> which made them aware of their specific community ties but also prepared them to make horizontal alliances in the interest of larger emancipatory social or political movements. But the very logic of this movement for rehabilitation also imposed restrictions on their autonomy, as in the end, it was moderated, restrained, and eventually muted through *bhadralok* political mediation, which from the beginning had sought to tame and turn the refugees into vote banks. This book has sought to situate the caste question at the centre of the narrative of Partition and its long afterlife, and has endeavoured to record the voices of the Dalit in the history of Partition and refugee rehabilitation in Bengal. It explores how Partition impacted caste relations in general and Dalit politics in particular in late colonial and post-colonial Bengal.

However, we should add a rider here. The book deals primarily with the camp refugees and their struggle for rehabilitation; it, therefore, focuses almost exclusively on the Namasudra refugees who lived in these camps. The other Dalit group affected by Partition, the Rajbansis, remains outside its scope, barring a few occasional references, because their history after 1947 took a very different trajectory. The post-Partition migration to north Bengal districts, which constituted their traditional habitation space, did not only bring in Rajbansi refugees, but also a large number of non-Rajbansi *savarna* Hindu Bengali refugees from East Pakistan. Subsequently, many more Bengalis and Marwaris migrated to north Bengal from other parts of India. As a result, the Rajbansis not only began to lose their demographic dominance in this region, they also began to lose control over land and resources in competition with these outsiders who they identified as *Bhatias*. This led to the construction of a new regional identity among the Koch–Rajbansi community. Instead of trying to disentangle Rajbansi and Koch identities, they now tried to construct a new autochthonous ethnic identity by invoking the history of Koch tribal-state formation in north-eastern India in the sixteenth century and articulating a distinctive local linguistic identity based on Kamtapuri dialect. Their claim for a separate ethnospace has taken various forms since the 1960s, starting from the demand for a new province of Uttara Khand, later called Kamtapur by another group, out of six north Bengal districts. Yet another group wanted Union Territory status for Greater Cooch Behar. None of these movements, however, went very far due to the lack of unity within the community and leadership. These movements have been studied extensively<sup>39</sup> and

therefore remain outside the scope of this book.

## The Book

The book begins with a brief description of how the autonomous SC movement developed in colonial Bengal, spearheaded by two communities—the Rajbansis in the north and the Namasudras in the eastern districts. It looks critically at how space was important for the formation of their identity and social mobilisation in the early twentieth century. When their ancestral homeland was threatened by Partition, they could hardly remain unaffected. The rest of the chapter looks at how Partition politics affected and disrupted organised SC movement, taking the narrative through the election of 1946, the riots in Calcutta, Noakhali, and other parts of East Bengal, Hindu mobilisation of the Dalit, and the Communist intervention through Tebhaga movement. It looks critically at the question of Dalit identity on the eve of Partition and the division of Dalit leadership into two rival groups on the issue of Partition and alliance with the Muslim League. The chapter seeks to show how Dalit responses to Partition politics were shaped through a complex interaction between several factors like their subalternity, religious attitudes, sense of identity, idea of space, and political mobilisation.

**Chapter 2** explains, first of all, why the Namasudra peasants of East Bengal did not migrate to India immediately after the Partition in 1947. It looks at the role of Jogendranath Mandal and the Bengal branch of the AISCF, which advocated a Dalit–Muslim alliance. It examines why and how did that alliance break down as a result of rising Islamic nationalism and an unusual scarcity of resources in post-Partition East Bengal. The chapter looks critically at the riots of 1950 which triggered the great East Bengali Dalit peasant migration. It examines why the Delhi Pact of 1950 failed to stem the tide of this migration which continued until the border was sealed in 1957. The chapter interrogates the official theory of ‘economic migration’ and argues that these Dalit peasants migrated because they suffered from a profound sense of insecurity created by a pervasive environment of low-intensity violence. This violence was not ‘objective’<sup>40</sup> or ‘structural’<sup>41</sup> or ‘routine’;<sup>42</sup> we call it post-Partition conjunctural violence with its own temporality, produced by the specific historical context of Partition and its complex aftermath. It seriously disrupted the historic patterns of Dalit–Muslim relations in the East Bengal countryside. For the Dalit migrants, the experience of displacement had been so very traumatic that it created for them a permanent rupture with the past. Most of them never wanted to go back to their homeland again. But on arrival in West Bengal—the new homeland of

the Hindus—they soon found out that no one was waiting to welcome them.

After arriving in West Bengal, these refugees were first taken to a variety of refugee camps scattered across the state. [Chapter 3](#) begins with a description of the refugee camps as ‘spaces of hospitality’<sup>43</sup> and as sites for renegotiating old identities and forming new ones. These were not ‘spaces of exception’ where refugees were reduced to ‘bare life’,<sup>44</sup> but rather locations where we observe remarkable signs of agency of these displaced people, and expressions of their righteous indignation against the failings of the state, and its local functionaries. The chapter shows how their resistance was initiated at the grassroots level by Dalit camp leaders who organised themselves into Bastuhara Samitis. A major feature of this refugee resistance was the leading role taken by the women residents of the camps. But the very logic of their movement also prevented them from raising the caste question, as they came under wider political influences. The major resistance of the Dalit refugees was to the government’s rehabilitation plan of dispersal and here they needed the support and mediation of mainstream opposition parties. And as was mentioned earlier, it put constraints on their autonomy and agency. This chapter also looks at the struggles and self-rehabilitation endeavours of those Dalit refugees who settled in the border districts of Nadia and 24-Parganas.

[Chapter 4](#) looks at the evolution of a state policy of rehabilitation for these post-1950 Dalit peasant refugees in West Bengal. The chapter critically examines the political debates which ultimately led to the evolution of a rehabilitation policy that was premised on an erroneous assumption of the paucity of reclaimable land in West Bengal. So, the refugees were to be dispersed, first to the neighbouring states of Bihar and Orissa, who were reluctant to accept them, and then to the Andaman Islands and Dandakaranya, where they were seen as units of productive labour required to implement developmental projects. The chapter shows that the state government was reluctant about dispersal through coercion, but the Union Ministers Morarji Desai, and Mehr Chand Khanna did not want to wait, as the refugees were causing continuous drainage on the state exchequer. The chapter examines the divergent positions of various political parties as well as interactions between the state and central governments.

[Chapter 5](#) critically examines the roles of the UCRC under CPI leadership and the SBBS under PSP leadership in the massive refugee satyagraha of March–April 1958. The chapter looks at the forms of resistance and modes of mobilisation and assesses their revolutionary potential. It also unpacks the contradictions between different layers of political leadership in this refugee movement, shows how the caste question was deliberately suppressed by the Leftist leadership

although it was very much present in the structure of the movement. It also looks at the movement led by Jogendranath Mandal's EIRC that deliberately raised the caste issue, and examines critically the consequences of its rightward political drift. Finally, it tries to explain why the Dalit refugees were ultimately abandoned by the *bhadralok* political elite, forcing them to go to Dandakaranya.

The book concludes that Partition politics profoundly affected and disrupted Dalit movements in Bengal. The Dalit peasant refugees who migrated to West Bengal in the 1950s should be considered as parts of the long history of Partition in the east. But unlike other Partition refugees, they were treated very differently by the Indian state for being Dalit and for being peasants. It is difficult to miss the caste factor in this story of broken promises. As the Dalit became refugees fighting for rehabilitation, the idioms of their struggle also changed. And this explains (at least partially) why after Independence and Partition caste movements mysteriously disappeared from West Bengal's public space, but caste discrimination continued. This book does not argue that this disappearance meant a decline or defeat of Dalit politics; it rather represented a transitional phase in their movement. The book tries to identify the new idioms of Dalit protest through the Dalit refugees' struggle against discrimination and uncaring rehabilitation policies of the Indian state. It locates the persistence of caste-based discrimination—both conscious and unconscious—in the way the *bhadralok* political leadership treated the Dalit refugees. The forceful renewal of Dalit movement in West Bengal in the twenty-first century provides ample evidence that it was never completely defeated.

The physical locale of this study remains limited to West Bengal, in the sense that our investigation does not extend to examine the conditions of refugees settled in Andaman Islands, Dandakaranya, or the neighbouring states. The period of study also ends in 1961, when the first phase of the Dandakaranya Project was completed and the refugee movement against dispersal policy was withdrawn. But the struggle of the Dalit refugees did not end there; nor could their leaders again carve out spaces for themselves in provincial politics in West Bengal. In the post-1961 period, they faced two crises that profoundly affected their lives and identity—the Hazratbal riot of 1964 and the Marichjhanpi massacre of 1978–79—both related to Partition and the story of dispersal. In an Epilogue, we therefore offer a short narrative of these two episodes and their aftermath to provide further evidence of injustice. The story of the riot has been reconstructed through our research. The Marichjhanpi incident has now been studied by several scholars, activists, and journalists.<sup>45</sup> We have carefully used this literature to comment on some of the important aspects of this

extraordinary saga of violence against the human rights of the Dalit refugees. In this Epilogue, we have also briefly commented on the subsequent recovery of Dalit selfhood by these displaced people through the spectacular rise of the Matua Mahasangha (MM), a heterodox religious sect through which the Namasudra caste movement had originally emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Through the efforts of its hereditary guru P.R. Thakur, in the 1980s, the Mahasangha offered a spiritual and social space where a geographically dispersed community could again relate to each other to recover a sense of home and identity. The other vehicle through which Dalit identity has again been able to redefine itself in contemporary West Bengal is an emergent literary movement, mostly contributed by Dalit refugee writers. They have emphatically asserted the centrality of Dalithood in the experiences of the East Bengali peasant refugees. The Epilogue briefly alludes to these recent developments in the story of the recovery of Dalit selfhood by the Bengali refugees.

The book extensively uses the official archives, particularly the Police Intelligence Branch (IB) records, as well as government reports, and newspapers to tell a complicated multi-layered story of Partition, migration, camp life, refugee resistance, rehabilitation politics, and the role of caste in that space. Interpretation of empirical information is based on insights derived from global theoretical literature on genocidal violence, forced migration, and refugee camps. The gaps in formal archival records we have tried to fill in through oral interviews and with first-person written accounts of Dalit refugees. The oral interviews were conducted in two phases. In 2001–02, Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury had conducted a series of interviews in various refugee camps for a different project. We have re-used some of those interviews conducted in Dhubulia, Jirat, and Cooper's camps. We conducted fresh interviews in 2013–14 with some of the inmates of Cooper's camp, Bagjola, and Sonarpur worksite camps. Initially, we had three group meetings—one per camp—with some former residents of these camps; then we had more intensive conversations with a few individuals selected from those groups. We also spoke to some important personalities involved in Dalit politics and refugee movements of this period. From these sources, we have tried to reconstruct a story that has turned out to be a narrative of unspeakable suffering, discrimination, dehumanisation, and injustice, as well as of resistance, protest, agency, and enterprise.

<sup>1</sup> Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*, New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press, 1998; Urvasi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, London, Hurst &

Company, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The Present History of West Bengal: Essays in Political Criticism*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1997, 27–46.

<sup>11</sup> Ravinder Kaur, *Since 1947: Partition Narratives Among Punjabi Migrants of Delhi*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2007, 164–65.

<sup>12</sup> Ahmed, 'The 1947 Partition of Punjab', 116–67.

<sup>13</sup> Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*; 'Partition and the Ruptures in Dalit Identity Politics in Bengal'.

<sup>14</sup> Sen, *The Decline of the Caste Question*.

<sup>15</sup> Anirban Bandyopadhyay, 'Orchestrating a Signal Victory: Ambedkar, Mandal and 1946 Constituent Assembly Election', in Biswamoy Pati, ed., *Invoking Ambedkar: Contributions, Receptions, Legacies*, New Delhi, Primus, 2014, 33–57.

<sup>16</sup> Ghazal Asif, 'Jogendranath Mandal and the Politics of Dalit Recognition in Pakistan', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 43:1, 2020, 119–35.

<sup>17</sup> Gyanendra Pandey, 'Community and Violence: Recalling Partition', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 32:32, 9 August 1997, 2037–45, quotation from 2037.

<sup>18</sup> Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*; A. Singh, ed., *The Partition in Retrospect*, New Delhi, Anamika, 2000; S. Kaul, ed., *The Partitions of Memory: The Afterlife of the Division of India*, New Delhi, Permanent Black, 2001; Kaur, *Since 1947*; Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001; V.F.-Y. Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2007; Neeti Nair, *Changing Homelands: Hindu Politics and the Partition of India*, Ranikhet, Permanent Black, 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Nilanjana Chatterjee, 'Midnight's Unwanted Children: East Bengali Refugees and the Politics of Rehabilitation', PhD thesis, Brown University, 1992; P.K. Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal*, Calcutta, Naya Udyog, 1999 [originally published in 1990]; Pradip Kumar Bose, ed., *Refugees in West Bengal: Institutional Practices and Contested Identities*, Calcutta, Calcutta Research Group, 2000; J. Bagchi and S. Dasgupta, eds., *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, Kolkata, Stree, vol. 1, 2003, vol. 2, 2009; R. Samaddar, ed., *Reflections on Partition in the East*, New Delhi, Vikas Publishing House, 1997; R. Samaddar, ed., *Refugees and the State: Practices of Asylum and Care in India, 1947–2000*, New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, and London, Sage Publications, 2003; Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947–1967*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007; Anindita Ghoshal, *Refugees, Borders and Identities: Rights and Habitat in East and Northeast India*, London and New York, Routledge, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, 235.

<sup>20</sup> Kaur, *Since 1947*, 157 and *passim*.

<sup>21</sup> Akanksha Kumar, 'Revisiting Partition of India 1947—Voice of Dalit Refugees', *International Journal of Social Science and Economic Research*, 4:3, March 2019, 2112–33.

<sup>22</sup> Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men*; Chatterjee, 'Midnight's Unwanted Children'; Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition*; Ghoshal, *Refugees, Borders and Identities*.

<sup>23</sup> Haimanti Roy, *Partitioned Lives: Migrants, Refugees, Citizens in India and Pakistan, 1947–1965*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2012, 11 and *passim*.

<sup>24</sup> Abhijit Dasgupta, *Displacement and Exile: The State–Refugee Relations in*



India, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> Debjani Sengupta, *Partition of Bengal: Fragile Borders and New Identities*, Delhi, Cambridge University Press, 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Udit Sen, *Citizen refugee: Forging the Indian Nation After Partition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018; quotation from 32.

<sup>27</sup> Anwesha Sengupta, "'They must have to go therefore, elsewhere': Mapping the Many Displacements of Bengali Hindu Refugees from East Pakistan, 1947 to 1960s, Public Arguments-2, Tata Institute of Social Sciences Patna Centre, January 2017; 'Moveable Migrants, Laboring Lives: Making Refugees "Useful" in Post-colonial India', in Mahua Sarkar, ed., *Work Out of Place*, Oldenburg, De Gruyter, 2018, 121–48, particularly 141–45.

<sup>28</sup> Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury, 'Exiled to the Andamans: The Refugees from East Pakistan', in Bose, ed., *Refugees in West Bengal*, 130–41. See Chapters 2 and 6 by Madhumita Mazumdar in Clare Anderson, Madhumita Mazumdar, and Vishvajit Pandya, *New Histories of the Andaman Islands: Landscape, Place and Identity in the Bay of Bengal, 1790–2012*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016, 29–61, 170–200; Carola Erika Lorea, 'Contesting Multiple Borders: Bricolage Thinking and Matua Narratives on the Andaman Islands', *Southeast Asian Studies*, 9:2, August 2020, 231–76.

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<sup>3</sup> Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872–1947*, Second edition, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2011; *Caste Culture and Hegemony: Social Dominance in Colonial Bengal*, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 2004; Swaraj Basu, *Dynamics of a Caste Movement: The Rajbansis of North Bengal, 1910–1947*, New Delhi, Manohar, 2003; Neha Chatterji, 'Sacred Calling, Worldly Bargain: Caste, Self-cultivation and Mobilisation in Late Colonial Bengal', Unpublished PhD thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Subhasri Ghosh, 'In Search of "Home": Dandakaranya and East Bengali Migrants, 1957–1977', *Südasiens-Chronik—South Asia Chronicle*, 7, 2017, 95–122; quotation from 115.

<sup>31</sup> Babul Kumar Pal, *Barisal theke Dandakaranya: Purbabanger krishijibi udbastur punarbashaner itihās (From Barisal to Dandakaranya: Rehabilitation of the Agriculturist Refugees of East Bengal)*, Kolkata, Mitram, 2010.

<sup>32</sup> Jayanti Basu, *Reconstructing the Bengal Partition: The Psyche Under a Different Violence*, Calcutta, Samya, 2013.

<sup>33</sup> Swati Sengupta Chatterjee, *West Bengal Camp Refugees: Dispersal and Caste Question 1950–1965*, Kolkata, Sreejoni, 2019.

<sup>34</sup> Subhasri Ghosh and Debjani Dutta, 'Forgotten Voices from the P.L. Camps', in J. Bagchi and S. Dasgupta, eds., *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, vol. 2, Kolkata, Stree, 2009, 199–222.

<sup>35</sup> Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury and Ishita Dey, *Citizens, Non-citizens and in Camp Lives*, Calcutta, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, 2009; Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, 'Nostalgia of "Desh", Memories of Partition', *Economic and*

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<sup>36</sup> Romola Sanyal, 'Urbanizing Refuge: Interrogating Spaces of Displacement', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 38:2, 2014, 558–72; Dibyadyuti Roy, 'From Non-places to Places: Transforming Partition Rehabilitation Camps Through the Gendered Quotidian', *Millennial Asia*, 9:1, 2018, 19–39.

<sup>37</sup> Willem van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*, London, Anthem Press, 2005; Tetsuya Nakatani, 'Partition Refugees on Borders: Assimilation in West Bengal', in A. Dasgupta, M. Togawa, and A. Barkat, eds., *Minorities and the State: Changing Social and Political Landscape of Bengal*, New Delhi, Sage, 2011, 66–73; Manosanto Biswas, *Banglar Matua Andolon: Samaj, Sanskriti, Rajneeti (The Matua Movement of Bengal: Society, Culture, Politics)*, Kolkata, Setu Prakasani, 2016.

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<sup>5</sup> Manoranjan Byapari and Meenakshi Mukherjee, 'Is There Dalit Writing in Bengali?', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42:41, 13–19 October 2007, 4116–20; Manohar Mouli Biswas and Shyamal Kumar Pramanik, eds., *Satabarshe Bangla Dalit Sahitya [Hundred Years of Bangla Dalit Literature]*, Kolkata, Chaturtha Duniya, 2011; Manohar Mouli Biswas, *Bangla Dalit Writer Writes Back*, ed. Jaydeep Sarangi, New Delhi, Author's Press, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> I. Ahmed, 'The 1947 Partition of Punjab: Arguments Put Forth Before the Punjab Boundary Commission by the Parties Involved', in I. Talbot and G. Singh, eds., *Region and Partition: Bengal, Punjab and the Partition of the Subcontinent*, Karachi, Oxford University Press, 1999, 116–67; Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 'Partition and the Ruptures in Dalit Identity Politics in Bengal', *Asian Studies Review*, 33:4, 2009, 455–67; [Bandyopadhyay, Caste, Protest and Identity](#), 224–29, 247–50; [Masayuki Usuda, 'Pushed Towards the Partition: Jogendra Nath Mandal and the Constrained Namasudra Movement'](#), in H. Kotani, ed., *Caste system, Untouchability and the Depressed*, New Delhi, Manohar, 1997, 221–74; [Dwaipayan Sen, The Decline of the Caste Question: Jogendranath Mandal and the Defeat of Dalit Politics in Bengal](#), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> R. Rawat, 'Partition Politics and Achhut Identity: A Study of Scheduled Castes Federation and Dalit Politics in U.P. 1946–1948', in S. Kaul, ed., *The Partitions of Memory*, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2001, 111–39; Rup Kumar Barman, *Partition and Its Impact on the Scheduled Castes of Bengal*, New Delhi, Abhijeet Publications, 2012; [Bandyopadhyay, Caste, Protest and Identity](#).

<sup>8</sup> [Butalia, The Other Side of Silence](#), 235–71; R. Rawat, 'Partition Politics and Achhut Identity', 111–39.

<sup>9</sup> Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition 1932–1947*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, 256–57.

<sup>38</sup> Ranabir Samaddar, 'Whatever Has Happened to Caste in West Bengal?', *Economic and Political Weekly*, XLVIII:36, 7 September 2013, 77–79, quotation from 78.

<sup>39</sup> Some of the more recent publications are: Madhab Chandra Adhikary, 'Socio-political Movement in Post-colonial North Bengal: A Case Study of the Rajbanshis', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 71, 2010–2011, 1233–42; Rajib Nandi, 'Spectacles of Ethnographic and Historical Imaginations: Kamatapur Movement and the Rajbanshi Quest to Rediscover Their Past and

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<sup>40</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence*, London, Profile Books, 2008, 1–2, 8.

<sup>41</sup> Rao, *The Caste Question*, 124; Gyanendra Pandey, 'Introduction', in G. Pandey, ed., *Unarchived Histories: The 'Mad' and the 'Trifling' in the Colonial and Postcolonial World*, London and New York, Routledge, 2014, 8, 14.

<sup>42</sup> Roy, *Partitioned Lives*, 22, 147–76.

<sup>43</sup> Adam Ramadan, 'Spatialising the Refugee Camp', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 38, 2013, 65–77.

<sup>44</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1998, 166–76.

<sup>45</sup> Chatterjee, 'Midnight's Unwanted Children'; Ross Mallick, 'Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and Marichjhapi Massacre', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 58:1, February 1999, 105–09; Annu Jalais, 'Dwelling on Marichjhapi: When Tigers became "Citizens", Refugees "Tiger-Food"', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 23 April 2005, 1757–62; Jagadish Chandra Mandal, *Marichjhapi, Udbastu: kara ebong keno? [Marichjhapi: Refugees: Who Are They and Why?]*, Kolkata, Bangadarpan Prakasan, 2005; Debdatta Chowdhury, 'Space, Identity, Territory: Marichjhapi Massacre, 1979', *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 15:5, 2011, 664–82; Jhuma Sen, 'Reconstructing Marichjhapi: From Margins and Memories of Migrant Lives', in Urvasi Butalia, ed., *Partition: The Long Shadow*, New Delhi, Zubaan, 2015, 102–27; Madhumoy Pal, ed., *Marichjhapi: Chinno Desh, Chinna Itihas [Marichjhapi: Divided Country, Divided History]*, Kolkata, Gangchil, 2016; and Deep Halder, *Blood Island: An Oral History of the Marichjhapi Massacre*, Noida, HarperCollins, 2019. Marichjhapi massacre has also been fictionalised by Amitav Ghosh in *The Hungry Tide*, Boston, New York, A Mariner Book, 2005.

# 1

## Caste and Partition

### Space and Social Mobilisation

The Dalit in Bengal were neither passive onlookers nor accidental victims of Partition politics and violence; they were deeply involved in it. The reasons for this Dalit entanglement in Partition politics, this chapter argues, are to be found in the political geography of Dalit movements in colonial Bengal. The social movements that began asserting Dalit identities in Bengal from the 1870s had two very clearly identifiable geographical locations, and two communities were at the forefront of these movements. One was the Rajbansi community, which lived mainly in the north Bengal districts of Rangpur, Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, and the Princely State of Cooch Behar.<sup>1</sup> The other community, the Namasudras, mainly lived in the eastern districts of Bakarganj, Faridpur, Jessore, and Khulna, but was also scattered in other eastern and central Bengal districts.<sup>2</sup> When the Dalit political movement started in the early twentieth century, these two communities provided the majority of its leaders and its main rural support base. For both these communities, their demographic concentration in closely defined geographical locations was a major factor behind successful social mobilisation. The Dalit movement was historically weak in western and central Bengal, where the lower caste peasants participated in radical peasant movements but were not organised as castes. The exception was the south 24-Parganas, where the Paundras were organised but remained largely on the side of the Congress and its brand of nationalism.<sup>3</sup>

Space becomes important in the life history of a social-political movement in two important ways. Firstly, as Edward Said observed, ‘space acquires emotional and even rational sense by a kind of poetic process, whereby the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning for us.’<sup>4</sup> These meanings emotionally construct collective identities and social linkages that lay behind many of these movements. As Doreen Massey has argued, space is a ‘product of interrelations’—the ‘identities/entities, the “relations” between them, and the spatiality which is part of them, are all co-constitutive’.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, both Rajbansi and Namasudra identities were deeply embedded in their respective regions, the Rajbansis having old tribal

ties with the land and a history of regional state formation in north Bengal, and the Namasudras emerging as a peasant community of pioneer cultivators toiling their way up through the land reclamations in the Eastern Bengal districts since the late nineteenth century. Their identities were thus firmly rooted in the spaces and ecologies they lived in. Their sense of belonging to that space was both in terms of physical possessions of land and home, as well as historical, cultural, and affective ties.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, as mentioned above, as they lived in a compact space they could mobilise more easily for a social or political cause. Therefore, if we had looked at how the Radcliffe line was drawn to divide Bengal, it would become clear why both the Rajbansis and the Namasudras were so deeply perturbed. The Rajbansi territory was divided down the middle, while the Namasudra habitation zone almost entirely went to Pakistan, only a few still lived on the other side of the border in the central districts. This geographical disruption was bound to create anxieties, and reconfigure their social and political movements, as they began to align with the broader subcontinental politics in the hope of influencing the decisions at the top, losing in the process their unity and autonomy. This chapter draws attention to how the threatened disruption of political geography affected Dalit identity and politics in Bengal and jeopardised their political future.

## Elections and the Political Divide

The Government of India Act of 1935 secured the SCs thirty reserved seats in the Bengal Legislative Council.<sup>7</sup> In the election that followed in 1937, despite Congress mobilisation and successes in other provinces, only five of these thirty seats were won by its candidates; two went to the Hindu Sabha, while the rest (twenty-three) went to Independents. Two more SC candidates, one Congress, and one non-Congress (Jogendranath Mandal) won unreserved seats.<sup>8</sup> But these non-Congress representatives could not combine into a united Dalit political front to assert their autonomous power, although initially by supporting the Krishak Praja Party–Muslim League government under Fazlul Huq they had managed to prevent the Congress and its high caste *bhadralok* leadership from getting access to governmental power. Eventually, around 1942–43, three distinct groups emerged among these ‘Independents’—the Congress-nationalist Independents; the Bengal Scheduled Caste Party headed by Mukunda Behari Mullick; and the Bengal Scheduled Caste League led by Jogendranath Mandal. By early 1943, the nationalist group dissipated due to frustration with Congress indifference,<sup>9</sup> and many of them supported the Muslim League ministry led by Sir Nazimuddin.<sup>10</sup> In May 1943, Mandal

established the Bengal branch of the All India Scheduled Castes Federation (AISCF), which Ambedkar had founded the previous year.

By 1945, the Dalit movement in Bengal was divided into two main opposing groups. On one side, was the AISCF under Mandal's leadership. It had branches in the districts of Bogra, Jessore, Tripura, Rajshahi, Faridpur, Rangpur, and Bardhaman. Barisal had three branches; Mymensingh and Khulna had two each; and one more branch was about to be opened in Dacca.<sup>11</sup> In other words, except for Bardhaman, its strength was mainly concentrated in eastern Bengal, where the Namasudras mainly lived. In north Bengal, it was aligned with the Kshatriya Samiti of the Rajbansis. In western Bengal, the AISCF organisation was weak or non-existent because the SC groups which had the strength of numbers in those districts, like the Bagdis, Bauris, Chamars, and Jeliya Kaibarttas, were economically so depressed and had such limited literacy rates that they could not organise themselves or join autonomous caste movements like those of the larger castes. After 1937, their participation in the electoral process was also limited as voting rights depended on the high property and educational qualifications. And when they did participate in it, they remained under the wings of the mainstream political parties like Congress. The exceptions were the Paundras in south Bengal, as they had moved up the social scale in the early twentieth century with many substantial peasants, superior tenure holders, and zamindars, and with a high literacy rate. But their movement, for various historical reasons, followed the mainstream nationalist stream.<sup>12</sup> On the other side of the political spectrum was the All India Depressed Classes League, affiliated with Congress, and led by the Congress legislator Radhanath Das (a leader of the Chamars). One of its vice presidents was the Namasudra leader P.R. Thakur, and another prominent member was the Paundra leader Hem Chandra Naskar.<sup>13</sup> The sitting SC Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) at this stage aligned variously with these two opposing camps, with the League enjoying a majority over the Federation. We do not have much information about the activities and strengths of the two contending organisations, except for a police report from October 1945, which mentions: 'So far there has been very little or no overt local activity social or political on the part of both the organisations.'<sup>14</sup> However, they were galvanised into action as the election of 1946 approached.

In this election, the AISCF contested seven reserved and one unreserved (General) seat in Bengal and won only one reserved seat, where its president Jogendranath Mandal was elected. He had lost in two other constituencies, one reserved and the other unreserved. Its ally, the Kshatriya Samiti of the Rajbansis, contested five reserved



seats and won only one, which was uncontested. By contrast, Congress SC candidates won twenty-four reserved seats (out of a total of thirty). Prasannadeb Raikat (Rajbansi) and P.R. Thakur (Namasudra) won the election as Independent candidates;<sup>15</sup> but both later joined the Congress. The 1946 election results thus represented a complete reversal of the 1937 result, when among thirty-two elected SC candidates, only seven belonged to Congress. In the Rajbansi-dominated Dinajpur SC reserved constituency, Rup Narayan Roy, a communist candidate, won, adding another interesting dimension to the 1946 election scenario.

But how should we read these election results and explain the reversal of the electoral fortunes of the Congress in reserved constituencies? We should start with the first caveat that this election result did not adequately reflect the minds of the Dalit peasantry, because, given the high property and educational qualifications, only about 10 per cent of the adult population had voting rights. It is also true, as Ambedkar had pointed out, that the dual voting system imposed by the Poona Pact of September 1932 favoured the Congress candidates, as the caste Hindus were most likely to vote for them in a joint electorate.<sup>16</sup> Echoing Ambedkar, Mandal too claimed in a speech on 31 December 1946 that while Congress candidates received only 28 per cent of the SC votes, the non-Congress candidates received 72 per cent and still lost.<sup>17</sup>

While the claims of Ambedkar and Mandal about vote share were unmistakably correct, for Bengal, that reading still leaves a few questions unanswered. It does not explain, how under the same dual voting system in the 1937 election, non-Congress Independent candidates could win as many as twenty-three of the thirty reserved seats. The Congress political machine was as active in 1937 as it was in 1946. It also does not explain how Jogendranath Mandal could win his 1937 election from an unreserved General constituency in Barisal against an influential caste Hindu Congress candidate. Masayuki Usuda has shown that broad-based, cross-caste, and cross-religious mobilisation secured his victory.<sup>18</sup> So the question we want to pose here is, if such a broad social coalition was at all possible in 1937—despite the obvious asymmetrical power relations in Bengali Hindu society—why did it not work in 1946?

One might argue that widespread corruption on the part of the colonial state and the caste Hindu election officials contributed to AISC's defeat.<sup>19</sup> It is also true that on 7 January 1946, the then Governor of Bengal, R.G. Casey, had almost exactly predicted the results of the forthcoming Assembly election. How could he know unless the government was involved in manipulating the results? However, if we read his whole letter, it would become clear that he

was projecting these results based on of his analysis of the just-completed election to the Central Assembly, where he found that: ‘the only two parties that count are the Congress and the Muslim League’. As the ‘nationalist’ or Congress Muslim candidates were marginalised, so were the non-Congress SCs.<sup>20</sup> There were undoubtedly some corrupt practices involved, as there was evidence of Congress trying to inflate the electoral rolls with caste Hindu underage voters.<sup>21</sup> But it was not clear how widespread such malpractices were. And the available evidence also suggests that allegations of corruption were flying in both directions and they started long before the election.<sup>22</sup> Congress also alleged that the Muslim League, being in the government, manipulated the electoral process by controlling the officials.<sup>23</sup> Archival records show that the government took these allegations seriously and took elaborate anti-corruption measures, including new legislation (Corrupt Practices and Election Enquiries Bill passed in January 1946).<sup>24</sup> It does not mean that everything was squeaky clean. As Governor Burrows, who succeeded Casey, conceded to the Secretary of State: ‘I cannot say of course that in no case did any Government officer of any grade show any particularity.’ But whenever there was any specific allegation, he assured, it was investigated and, in every case, it was found to be without foundation.<sup>25</sup> It is difficult to establish from the archives that any large-scale manipulation of the election had taken place. So, it compels us to look for other reasons to explain what changed between 1937 and 1946 to cause such a complete reversal of the electoral fortunes of Congress.

The most crucial change that had happened was that the regional Dalit politics of Bengal had been sucked into the subcontinental politics of Partition. Mandal had joined the AISCF, and by doing so, he had proclaimed his separation from mainstream nationalism championed by the Congress; and more significantly, he had aligned with the Muslim League. He believed that the Dalit and Muslim peasants in east Bengal—both being minorities—had a shared past of oppression and deprivation, and so a Dalit–Muslim political alliance was in the best interests of the Dalit. But interestingly, his pro-Muslim League stance did not endear him to many of his fellow Dalits, who were intensely anxious about their future in a Muslim majority province. His rival Independent candidate in the Pirojpur–Patuakhali constituency, the Namasudra leader Upendranath Edbar, made a fervent appeal to his caste brothers that, as evidence of their ‘unflinching faith in the Hindu dharma of their forebears’, they should not vote for Mandal.<sup>26</sup> The upper-caste Hindu *bhadraloks* were clearly panicking and seething in anger. The League in 1946 was fighting the election on the ‘Pakistan’ demand. The creation of Pakistan, League



leader M.A. Jinnah had announced in an election meeting, was ‘the only choice and the only issue before us’;<sup>27</sup> the election was presented as a referendum for Pakistan.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, if Mandal’s caste was a factor, even more important was his support for the Muslim League. The Congress launched a vigorous emotional campaign focusing on this single issue. Surendramohan Ghosh, the Congress president, implored the voters of Barisal ‘to ponder and pause before casting their vote against Congress, whether they wanted disruption of India or Pakistan in Bengal or a United India with Bengal as an integral part.’<sup>29</sup> Congress too was looking for a mandate from this election—a mandate for independence for a united India. As Ambedkar himself noted, the main ‘issue over which the election was fought was independence and Quit India’<sup>30</sup>—other issues mattered less. Therefore, in meeting after meeting, Mandal and his group were derided as puppets of the Muslim League, out to subvert the unity and independence of India and create Pakistan.<sup>31</sup> A vote for Mandal was deemed to be a vote for Pakistan.

Voting in the 1946 election throughout India was highly partisan—the Muslim League got 74.7 per cent votes in the Muslim constituencies, while Congress got 80.9 per cent votes in the General constituencies.<sup>32</sup> When so much was at stake, it was not surprising that Congress would mobilise all its power and resources to defeat Mandal, who had crossed the line twice—once by going over to the AISC and then by aligning with the Muslim League. In this politics of representation, while the Muslim League claimed to represent all Muslims—thus condemning ‘nationalist’ Muslims like Maulana Azad as Congress ‘show boys’<sup>33</sup>—the Congress too claimed to represent all Hindus, including the Dalit—thus branding Mandal as a stooge in the hands of the Muslim League.

We also should not, in this context, underestimate the effects of the communist mobilisation of Dalit peasants around the demand for *Tebhaga*<sup>34</sup> in 1945–46, which was reflected in election results. Not only did a communist candidate win in a reserved seat in Dinajpur against an influential Khshatriya Samiti candidate, but in some other reserved constituencies in the north and the east Bengal, the vote share of the communist candidates was higher than that of the Kshatriya Samiti or AISC candidates.<sup>35</sup> Adrienne Cooper has argued that the support base of ‘the B.P.K.S. (Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha) was built on community networks because they provided accessible structures for organisation ...’<sup>36</sup> When the *Tebhaga* movement actually began in 1946,<sup>37</sup> its main support base was provided by the Rajbansi *adhiars* (sharecroppers) in north Bengal and the Namasudra *bargadars* (sharecroppers) in the east and central Bengal. For the Rajbansis, it tore apart their community bonds, as Rajbansi *adhiars* fought against

Rajbansi *jotedars* (middle-level landowning peasants who employed sharecroppers), despite Kshatriya Samiti fervently appealing for unity. For Namasudras, there was no such internal crisis, as their community leaders remained incredibly silent about the movement. In some areas, there were attempts to direct their attention to local conflicts with Muslim peasants. This indicated yet another dimension of political mobilisation among the Dalit masses during this period, taking political support away not only from the class politics of the Kisan Sabha but also from the AISCf agenda of the Dalit–Muslim alliance. We will talk about that shift later.

By way of explaining election results, we want to emphasise here that in electoral politics, numbers do not automatically convert into votes for any particular candidate of a community if multiple candidates of the same community are contesting for the same votes. Effective electioneering requires strategy, organisation, and mobilisation. We argue that the most plausible direct explanation for Mandal's and the AISCf's electoral debacle was the organisational limitations and political geography of the Dalit movements in Bengal. Of course, it was an 'uneven playing field'<sup>38</sup>—that is precisely the point we want to make. The Bengal branch of the AISCf was launched only in May 1943, one year after the establishment of its parent body. In less than three years, and with limited resources, it was not possible to build an organisational network spread evenly across the province that could ensure its electoral victory—particularly, when it was fighting against a powerful national party like Congress with its extensive organisation and endless resources. The divisions and rivalries within the ranks of the Dalit leadership did not help either. While it was true that in many reserved SC constituencies, the non-Congress candidates together polled more votes than the winning Congress candidates (as Mandal had rightly pointed out), it perhaps also indicated that the anti-Congress voices were not yet united under the banner of the AISCf. And this disunity resulted in Dalit opposition votes being divided among so many Independents.

The organisational inadequacy of the AISCf vis-a-vis the Congress was further reflected in the fact that in the primary election, out of thirty reserved seats in the province, it could field candidates only for seven; and its ally Kshatriya Samiti contested five seats. So, it was only for twelve out of thirty seats that the AISCf and its ally could find candidates. In total, fifteen seats were uncontested, out of which thirteen went to Congress, Kshatriya Samiti got one, and another went to an Independent candidate.<sup>39</sup> One reason for not being able to field candidates in all reserved constituencies could be the scarcity of funds, despite support from the poor Dalit communities.<sup>40</sup> But, if we look at the geographical distribution of these uncontested seats, the

spatial limitation of the AISCf organisation at once becomes apparent. These seats were mostly located in the west and central Bengal districts of Bardhaman, Birbhum, Bankura, Medinipur, Murshidabad, 24-Parganas, and Malda. All these districts lay outside the Rajbansi and Namasudra habitation zones. As mentioned earlier, the Dalit movement in these districts was historically weak,<sup>41</sup> and therefore, AISCf remained unrepresented.<sup>42</sup> In other provinces also it did 'not even put up candidates in quite a good number of constituencies' indicating a limitation of the geographical spread of its organisational network to match that of the Congress, and it obviously had an impact on the overall seat share in the election.<sup>43</sup> The limitation reflected the Dalit's strategic disadvantage of being a 'territorially dispersed minority';<sup>44</sup> not everywhere they had that spatial concentration of numbers and consequent capacity to mobilise.

But the electoral debacle throughout India spelled a crisis for the AISCf. Although Congress could not legitimately claim to represent all Dalit, given its poor vote share in the contested reserved seats, the Cabinet Mission that visited India shortly after did not consider that argument. Looking at the overall seat share, it recognised Congress—not AISCf—as the legitimate representative of the SCs. The SCs were not recognised as a separate minority group and the Interim Government that was constituted included only one Congress nominee, Jagjivan Ram, as the sole representative of such communities. To protest against this shifting of state patronage, Ambedkar launched a non-violent passive resistance or *satyagraha* campaign in Poona on 15 July, and it gradually spread to other parts of north and central India.<sup>45</sup> The Bengal branch of the AISCf took up the cause in right earnest. As Mandal wrote to Ambedkar, to protest against the Cabinet Mission decision, 'we took out a very very big procession on 24.7.46. The procession was about half a mile in length consisting of several thousands of people ... covering a distance of about 10 miles. It was an unprecedented affair in Calcutta.'<sup>46</sup>

If this was the beginning, the movement was soon to gather further momentum in the province. The 15th of August 1946 was observed as the 'Anti-Poona Pact Day'. According to a police report, 'a procession of 200 persons' paraded through different streets of central Calcutta, finally converging at the foot of the Monument, where a meeting took place. The *Azad* on the other hand described it as 'a huge procession', as people from practically all parts of the city poured in to join. At the meeting, Mandal and other speakers congratulated the *satyagrahis* in Poona and condemned the Cabinet Mission and the Congress for ignoring the legitimate demands of the Dalit. Mandal indicated a prolonged campaign against both the British and the Congress in association with the Muslim League, which had lent support to their

cause.<sup>47</sup> Following this, meetings of different sizes took place in the interior under the auspices of the AISC. About 300 people paraded through the main roads of Jessore under the leadership of Amulyadhan Ray. Later in a meeting, the leaders condemned the Cabinet Mission's decision and argued that they had been duped by the caste Hindu leaders. Then, in Kharagpur on 17 August, about 200 people attended a meeting and expressed solidarity with Ambedkar. About 1,500 people joined a procession in Kanchrapara, while 150 attended a meeting in Bakarganj.<sup>48</sup> About fifty Dalit students marched through the streets of Khulna; at a meeting that followed, the speakers urged the Dalit to unite under the banner of the AISC, and not to co-operate with the Interim Government, as Jagjivan Ram was not a chosen representative of fifty million Dalit.<sup>49</sup> At a meeting on 1 September at the Calcutta office of the AISC, resolutions were adopted describing the Interim Government 'a communal government of the caste Hindus', which was 'anti-democratic' and 'anti-constitutional'. Appeals were made to the British as well as to other Allied Governments to intervene to rectify this injustice.<sup>50</sup> However, this particular movement of the AISC soon began to lose momentum, as other developments overshadowed this campaign.

Following the election of 1946, the alliance between the AISC and the Muslim League became stronger in Bengal. Gandhi complained to Mountbatten in June 1947 that 'there has been a movement to win over to the Muslim side the so-called scheduled classes and the so-called aboriginal races.'<sup>51</sup> When the composition of the Interim Government was announced with only one SC member nominated by Congress, Jinnah was extremely bitter as he tried to undermine the claim of the 'caste Hindu Fascist Congress' to represent all Hindus.<sup>52</sup> On 31 July 1946, he wrote to the Viceroy that he was 'letting down the Scheduled Castes, as one of them is proposed to be nominated by the Congress and not by the real spokesmen of the Scheduled castes.' This was in his opinion, 'most unjust to a community of 60 million people who are groaning under the social and economic tyranny of the high caste Hindus, whom alone the Congress really represents.'<sup>53</sup> And when this arrangement still went ahead, in August 1946, he openly charged that the SCs were 'let down by the Viceroy' as they were 'purposely anti-Congress'.<sup>54</sup> Later, in October 1946, when the Muslim League joined the Interim Government, he selected Jogendranath Mandal as the League nominee for that government. In a press interview, the League spokesperson Liaquat Ali Khan justified the appointment by saying that—'The League has always championed the cause of not only the Mussalmans but all the down-trodden people of this country.'<sup>55</sup>

We do not know how Ambedkar responded to this nomination, as

he was in London when it was announced. Mandal's son Jagadish Mandal quotes a telegram sent by him from London, which stated: 'You have my blessing'.<sup>56</sup> Ambedkar re-affirmed his support for Mandal's nomination in a letter to D.G. Jadhav on 29 October, where he also expressed his scepticism about excessive dependence on the Muslim League.<sup>57</sup> As Chairez-Garza has recently shown, since the 1945 Simla conference, Ambedkar had been disillusioned with Jinnah, who insisted on 'parity' between Hindu and Muslim representation, which Ambedkar thought was prejudicial to the claims of other minorities. He believed that Jinnah was 'playing a double game' and was merely using the SCs for his political benefits. He was therefore becoming sceptical about the prospects of a lasting alliance with the Muslim League.<sup>58</sup> Mandal's proximity to the League in Bengal thus appears to be not exactly in line with Ambedkar's position at the national level.

However, Ambedkar, at this stage, was working closely with Mandal for his election to the Constituent Assembly (CA) from the Bengal Legislative Assembly. When it became impossible for him to get to the CA from his home constituency in Bombay, he filed his nomination from Bengal on the invitation of Mandal. He came to Calcutta in late June–early July and made a fervent appeal to the Congress SC legislators to gather enough courage to break the ranks and rectify the injustices inflicted by the Cabinet Mission and the Congress. At this stage, the other SC candidates from Bengal were the veteran Congress SC leader Radhanath Das, the Namasudra leader P.R. Thakur who had by now joined the Congress, and Mukunda Behari Mullick, who eventually withdrew. While both Das and Thakur were elected, Mandal, through his initiative, ensured Ambedkar's victory, with five (four required) first preference votes.<sup>59</sup> There is no way to know who actually voted for Ambedkar.<sup>60</sup> But significantly, just before the election in October 1946, four Congress SC MLAs had defected from the Congress and expressed their faith in Ambedkar's leadership.<sup>61</sup> What their political act tells us is that the loyalties of these Dalit leaders towards the Congress were not permanent or unconditional, but strategic. However, this was the period when all these alliances and loyalties were put to the serious test by the outbreak of riots in August 1946.

## **The Riots**

The unfolding political situation of 1946 needs to be understood within the general context of the changing Dalit–Muslim relationship in Bengal. There was no dearth of instances of conflict between Dalit and Muslim peasants in the east Bengal countryside since the late

nineteenth century. There were riots between the two communities in 1889, 1911, 1923, 1925, and 1938 in various eastern Bengal districts. But these riots were not about religion; they were for honour and land, for which both these two upwardly mobile peasant communities were competing with each other. And there were also examples of co-operation and common resistance to landlord oppression and capitalist exploitation. In most cases, these oppressors were caste Hindus.<sup>62</sup> But since the 1940s, this competitive/collaborative relationship between Dalit and Muslim peasants had been drawn into the broader politics for representation and communal space. As India started drifting uncomfortably towards the transfer of power and Partition, Dalit politics in Bengal also began to experience tension and ruptures on the issue of their relationship with the Muslims and the future of their habitational space. The result was the politicisation and institutionalisation of the communal divide in rural east Bengal, with the Dalit being profoundly affected by it. It does not mean that all Dalits had joined the communal forces. But it was in this environment took place the Dacca riot of 18–21 March 1941, in which the Dalit Namasudras were both perpetrators of violence and its victims.<sup>63</sup> In the middle of that riot, on 20 March, another fierce riot took place in Khulna, and it was more directly between the Namasudras and the Muslims. One Namasudra village and one Muslim village were burnt to the ground. If the year 1942 passed off peacefully on the communal front due to the Quit India Movement, in 1943 we again heard about incidents between the two communities in Jessore and Faridpur. And then another serious riot broke out on 25 March 1944 in Mollahat police station in Khulna, where in an area of about four to six square kilometres, the two groups, numbering about a thousand on each side, fought each other for five days. In the end, 200 houses were burned, four Muslims and one Namasudra were killed, and several more were injured.<sup>64</sup>

This did not of course imply that the entire Bengali Dalit or more particularly Namasudra population had been assimilated into a Hindu nationalist mainstream. Around 1944 Dalit leaders Jogendranath Mandal and Mukunda Behari Mullick were touring east Bengal countryside to counter such mobilising activities of Hindu Mahasabha and its leader Shyama Prasad Mukherji. They were trying to contest and contain this Hindu nationalist influence.<sup>65</sup> But to what extent they were successful is a question to be raised; for, throughout 1944–45 we find reports of Namasudras chanting slogans like '*Hindu Shakti ki joy*' (victory to Hindu power), participating in Kalipuja processions, and singing and dancing provocatively in front of mosques.<sup>66</sup> As available evidence suggests, the Hindu–Muslim communal divide by the 1940s had entered its mass mobilisation phase and the Dalit could hardly

remain untouched by it.

The 1946 riots brought this situation into sharper focus. Mandal remained the only non-Muslim minister in the Muslim League ministry of H.S. Suhrawardy, which was widely held responsible for the Calcutta riot that started on the Day of Direct Action on 16 August 1946. As we have already noted, the previous day, on 15 August, the AISCF observed the Anti-Poona Pact Day. At the meeting, Mandal and other leaders criticised the Cabinet Mission decision to exclude the AISCF from future power-sharing arrangements in India and extolled the virtues of the Dalit-Muslim alliance. The following day, on 16 August, the supporters of the AISCF marched along with the League members to Ochterlony Monument, where at the meeting, Mandal once again spoke forcefully about the injustice meted out by the Cabinet Mission to the SCs of India.<sup>67</sup> It was after this meeting, as we all know, all hell broke loose on the streets of Calcutta.<sup>68</sup> It was followed by the Noakhali riot in East Bengal in October.<sup>69</sup> Unlike previous Dalit-Muslim riots, these were parts of a subcontinental scheme to divide political space in the wake of decolonisation. In the government documents as well as in Congress and Hindu Mahasabha reports,<sup>70</sup> these riots were described as Hindu-Muslim riots. The eleven volumes of the *Calcutta Disturbances Commission of Enquiry Minutes of Evidence* do not mention the word 'caste' even once. The victims and perpetrators of the riot are described as either 'Hindu' or 'Muslim'.<sup>71</sup> This was a period of death and destruction at a massive scale, when for the state the only criterion for classification, even for dead bodies, was religion.<sup>72</sup>

However, the available evidence clearly suggests that many of these 'Hindus' actually belonged to poor Dalit working classes or peasant communities like the Namasudras or Chamars. For example, there are police reports to show that in Calcutta in August 1946, violent incidents and killings were taking place in jute mill *bustees* (slums) in the Maheshtala police station area (where the Bata Shoe factory was located), Metiabruj, Dum Dum, Baranagar, Jagatdal, and Naihati, where not all slum dwellers were caste Hindus. Occasionally, in some reports, we come across the names of people who were killed or injured or lost their properties in Muslim attacks. Many of them were definitely Dalit.<sup>73</sup> Then, we also come across a petition from the President of the Calcutta Leather Workers Union on behalf of 40,000 'Harijan' (Chamar) shoemakers in Calcutta. About 1,000 of them were killed, it complained, their *bustees* were looted and many of them fled. But the Government of Bengal did nothing for their rehabilitation as they were not supporters of Mandal's Scheduled Caste Federation.<sup>74</sup> The obvious politics behind the petition notwithstanding, as the union was controlled by Congress politicians, it indicates nonetheless that



the Dalit population of Calcutta was also affected by the violence of August 1946.

Then in October came the disturbances in eastern Bengal affecting mainly the districts of Noakhali and Tripura. On 16 October, the Governor of Bengal wrote to the Secretary of State that the 'communal situation deteriorated in the district of Noakhali during the past fortnight, with Muslims being asked to enrol for national guard'. As trouble spread to other areas, 'large bands of Moslem hooligans ... [were] moving about terrorising Hindus and committing acts of arson, loot and murder, kidnapping and forcibly converting Hindus.' According to government estimates, about 2,000 to 3,000 refugees had left their homes and were to be given shelter; armed police were mobilised and ministers rushed to the spot.<sup>75</sup>

There are two contesting narratives on the Noakhali riot. The Governor, the Chief Minister (CM) H.S. Suhrawardy, and Jogendranath Mandal, then a Minister designate in the Interim Government at the centre, made an aerial survey of the affected areas. A confidential note on the India Office file alerted: 'The affected areas are thickly covered with trees, which makes aerial observation difficult.'<sup>76</sup> Yet, on the basis of that aerial survey, the government came to the conclusion that it was 'not a general rising of Moslems against Hindus, but activity (apparently organised) of a body of hooligans who have exploited existing communal feeling... [and they are] temporarily joined in each locality by belligerent Moslem roughs.'<sup>77</sup> In Mandal's estimation the number of dead was 'few hundreds', and he believed that the figures were exaggerated by panic and 'hearsay evidence'. He too believed that it was an act of 'local hoodlums'.<sup>78</sup> According to this narrative, there was nothing to implicate the Muslim League for complicity in this riot. The Muslim leader who was apprehended for taking a lead role was Golam Sarwar, who was defeated in the recent election by a Muslim League candidate.<sup>79</sup> However, the opposing narrative offered by Acharya J.B. Kripalani, the Congress President, who rushed to the troubled areas, concluded that it was 'previously arranged and prepared for. ... It was the result of Muslim League propaganda'. The number of refugees, according to his calculation, was between 40,000 and 50,000.<sup>80</sup> Mahatma Gandhi too headed towards Noakhali to stop the violence and work among the refugees.

In the cracks between these two contending narratives, the Dalit victims of the riot disappear, as all the existing reports present the victims of the riot as 'Hindus' and focus mainly on upper-caste Hindus who lost their properties and looked for shelter. The Noakhali district particularly had a large Namasudra and other Dalit peasant population. In the recent past, they were being particularly targeted



by Hindu Mahasabha and S.P. Mukherji for their communal mobilisation during the census operations of 1941, and this created a lot of tension in the area.<sup>81</sup> So, it was highly unlikely that they would remain unaffected by these acts of violence. The very fact that Jogendranath Mandal was flown to the disturbed areas—because he had ‘great influence locally’<sup>82</sup>—indicates that the victims included members of his caste or other SC groups. Further confirmation came a few days later, when P.N. Rajbhoj, the Secretary of the AISCF came to Calcutta, met the Commerce Minister Shamsuddin Ahmed, and then was taken to Noakhali and Tripura to ‘enquire into the condition of the Scheduled Caste population of those localities’.<sup>83</sup> He toured the areas for five days between 15 and 20 November and on his return gave a report to the CM on the condition of the SC population. He told the Associated Press of India that he visited ‘several villages in the affected areas where the people of a particular sect of the minority community [in all probability referring to the Namasudras] numbered about 40,000. Most of their houses had either been looted or set on fire. Many of these people had been forcibly converted.’<sup>84</sup>

We find corroboration of this story in Acharya Kripalani’s tour diary indicating that he had visited Charhain village, ‘occupied by about 20,000 Namasudras’. It was reported to be ‘completely devastated. Houses were burnt down, properties, ornaments, utensils, clothes and food grains were looted and cattle were driven away. Cases of abduction and murder have been reported.’<sup>85</sup> We also come across a telegram in the AICC files addressed to Acharya Kripalani; it was sent from the remote village of Himachar, ‘almost completely inhabited by people of Namasudras (Scheduled and Harijan Castes) numbering about a lakh or so’, who were ‘forcibly prevented for (sic) migrating’, although there was ‘much lawlessness and people have remained in great distress’.<sup>86</sup> Ashoka Gupta’s memoir recollecting her days during the Noakhali riots also reveals evidence of Dalit properties being destroyed, women being abducted and widespread conversion in Namasudra villages.<sup>87</sup> A final confirmation came on 21 May on the eve of Partition, when Manoranjan Das, the Secretary of the Noakhali district Taposili Hindu Samiti, issued a statement saying that from the Direct Action Day, the tension in Noakhali was quite high and the SCs were the main targets. He had written to Minister Mandal on 10 September 1946 pleading for help and protection but did not receive any reply. Then when the riots broke out, the SCs were the main victims. He and about 400 men, women, and children were attacked, many of them forcibly converted and held captive for twenty-six days. No help was forthcoming from the government. On the contrary, Mandal gave a statement that the SCs were fine.<sup>88</sup> At an AISCF meeting on 31 December 1946 in Calcutta, Mandal publicly

apologised for the losses incurred by the SC peasants in the recent riots in these two districts and condemned religious violence.<sup>89</sup> It was not surprising that in February 1947 at Mahatma Gandhi's prayer meeting in Tripura, we found among the participants '[a]bout 4000 Namasudras including a large number [of] women and children'.<sup>90</sup>

There is thus enough evidence to suggest that the Namasudra peasants of Tripura and Noakhali, like many of the Dalit working classes in the city of Calcutta, were at the receiving end of violence in the riots of 1946. They were not just accidental victims! And this violence tended to threaten the Dalit-Muslim alliance that the AISC was aiming for. And for that reason, this issue of victimhood was intensely politicised. At a meeting on 1 September 1946, the Bengal branch of the AISC adopted a resolution condemning the Congress for being responsible for the violence in Calcutta.<sup>91</sup> On the other hand, there was a concerted Congress campaign to discredit Mandal who was aligned with a Muslim League government charged of complicity in these acts of violence. Bejoy Krishna Sarkar, a Congress SC MLA, asked in a press statement what Mandal, who had lent his support to the 'Direct Action', did to save the lives and properties of innocent SCs who lost everything in Calcutta and Noakhali. Muslim 'goondas', he pointed out, 'made no discrimination between Caste Hindus and the Scheduled castes'.<sup>92</sup> Birat Mandal of the Scheduled Caste Association also issued a press statement, pointing out that: 'A large number of Scheduled Castes residing in Calcutta Bustees have been killed. At Beliaghata in Calcutta, the house of Babu Satish Chandra Bairagi, a follower of Dr. Ambedkar has been burnt to ashes. If the Scheduled Castes now launch a campaign against Govt. and the Congress, the Caste Hindus will not spare them.' His advice therefore was not to start 'a communal agitation at this critical moment'. Mr Jinnah, he warned, was 'against us', and he would not give what the SC people were demanding.<sup>93</sup> However, Mandal looked at these riots from a different perspective: for him, as his biographer tells us, these riots were not 'communal', but 'political battles between the Congress and the Muslim League', the Dalit being 'fodder for Hindu communalism'. But he was aware nonetheless that the Dalit had been affected by the riots and he asked them not to be swayed by these emotions.<sup>94</sup>

In the wake of the Calcutta-Noakhali riots, the communal relations in Bengal remained tense in the cities as well as in the countryside, as sporadic acts of violence continued to take place involving people from both communities, including the Dalit. For example, in the district of 24-Parganas, on 28 October 1946, in an irrigation canal called Bhangore Khal, 25 miles from Calcutta, a boat in which Namasudras from Khulna were taking back their unsold stocks of jute, was attacked and set on fire by the local Muslims.<sup>95</sup> On the other side,

after the Pakistan Day of 23 March, trouble broke out near Dhapa area, and a police report suggested that the 'Hindu Chamars' of Tangra were responsible.<sup>96</sup> In Noakhali at Chaumohani, the 'Hindu volunteers' continued to spread rumours and instigated the Dalit to vacate their houses and go to the relief camps.<sup>97</sup> Further afield, as police records show, in districts with large rural Dalit populations, the situations remained tense. In Faridpur, although situation improved by October, 'mutual distrust and suspicion between the communities still continue[d].'<sup>98</sup> In Bakarganj, 'communal tension was high and people were panicky'.<sup>99</sup> In Dacca, 'Apprehension and distrust ... [had] almost overtaken them.'<sup>100</sup> In Mymensingh, 'some tension still continues and the mutual suspicion is still there'.<sup>101</sup> It was within this environment of mistrust that the politics of 'Partition' were played out. And the Dalit could hardly remain untouched by it. The Dalit-Muslim relationship in Bengal was fast becoming tangled in a sub-continental political divide.

## **Towards Partition**

It was not surprising, therefore, that on the issue of alliance with the Muslim League, the rift within the Dalit population and the leadership in Bengal became sharply defined. Following the 'Direct Action Day' in August 1946, the Muslim League in Bengal tried to forge deeper bonds with the SCs in their fight for Pakistan. A Bengali pamphlet entitled 'To Muslims and Members of the Scheduled Caste Community' was intercepted by police from Faridpur and Khulna in November 1946. It was signed by Kwaza Nazimuddin, Jogendranath Mandal, and other prominent Muslim League and Dalit leaders. It regretted the recent incidents in Dacca, Noakhali, and Comilla, and argued that since the majority of the Muslim and Dalit communities lived in similar circumstances, they needed to work together. As the Cabinet Mission denied the claim of the latter to be recognised as a separate minority, the Muslim League and the AISCf decided to launch a joint campaign to further their common interests. And for this purpose, joint committees of the League and Federation were to be formed in every village, union, and thana.<sup>102</sup> This joint movement also clearly identified two enemies: 'British imperialism' and 'caste-Hindu Congress', who opposed the establishment of 'Pakistan' by the Muslims and denied the 'legitimate claims' of the SCs.<sup>103</sup> The battle lines were thus clearly drawn, and political mobilisation began.

Within this political context, when it was becoming apparent that the whole of Bengal might go to Pakistan, and the Bengali Hindu *bhadralok* would be reduced to the status of a perpetual minority, a campaign was launched for the Partition of Bengal. On 31 December

1946, a meeting of the 'West Bengal Provincial Committee' was held in Calcutta which resolved in favour of the 'creation of a separate Province called the West Bengal Province under the Central Indian Union composed of areas viz, City Calcutta, Presidency and Burdwan Divisions, Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling districts and western parts of Rajshahi Division, Bengali speaking Hindu areas of East Bihar, so that the new Province may form a separate Home of all Nationalists of Bengal . ...' This area was identified as the space where 'Nationalist'—read Hindu *bhadralok*—'genius and culture' could flourish.<sup>104</sup> The demand was soon taken over by the Hindu Mahasabha, as its Working Committee at a meeting on 2 February set up a committee under Shyama Prasad Mukherji to 'consider the feasibility and desirability of having a separate province of the Hindus in Bengal'.<sup>105</sup> The proposal naturally alarmed those Hindus who lived in eastern districts and they protested against such proposals which would 'disrupt the ancient unity and solidarity of Bengali Hindus'.<sup>106</sup> But such opposition was brushed aside when at the Tarakeswar conference in April 1947, the Hindu Mahasabha fully embraced the campaign 'to secure a Homeland for the Hindus of Bengal', and Congress subsequently endorsed it.<sup>107</sup>

The proposed division of Bengal further accentuated the schism in Dalit politics, as it would directly affect the habitational space of their communities. Leaders like Mandal and Rasiklal Biswas, who led the AISC, opposed it on the ground that the interests of Muslims and Dalits, both being poor and agriculturists, were identical.<sup>108</sup> In a press statement from his Delhi residence on 21 April, Mandal denounced the Partition demand by claiming that 'the majority of non-Muslims in Bengal were not behind the demand ... and that this could be proved by a referendum.' He agreed that this agitation had been started as 'a sort of bargaining counter to resist and discourage the demand for Pakistan of the Muslim League', but in his view the 'Remedy [was] worse than Disease'. He branded it as a 'Proposal of the Caste Hindus' and insisted that 'the Scheduled Castes [were] opposed' to it.<sup>109</sup>

On 23 April, Mandal came back to Calcutta from Delhi and met his colleagues on the executive committee of the AISC. He started travelling across the length and breadth of the province, lecturing against the proposed Partition.<sup>110</sup> He also tried to recruit, with the help of local Muslim League functionaries, SC volunteers in every district to form an opinion in favour of the anti-Partition campaign.<sup>111</sup> On 27 April at a meeting in Rangpur, the Rajbansi Kshatriya Samiti also resolved not to support the Partition of Bengal.<sup>112</sup> And finally, the Bengal branch of the AISC resolved on 14 May that 'the division of the province into Hindu and Muslim Bengal [was] no solution of the communal problems.' It would:

check the growing political consciousness and ruthlessly crush the solidarity of the Scheduled Castes of Bengal ... While the Scheduled Castes of Eastern Bengal ... [would] be at the mercy of the majority community [i.e., the Muslims] the Scheduled Castes of Western Bengal ... [would] be subject to perpetual slavery of the caste Hindus. Hence the Scheduled Castes of this province ... [could] not be a party to such a mischievous and dangerous move.<sup>113</sup>

The Dalit anti-Partition campaign took a major stride on 16 May when a large meeting was organised at the British India Association Hall in Calcutta. The situation in the city was so tense at this stage on the issue of Partition that an attempt was made to disrupt the meeting with local goons, but with no success.<sup>114</sup> It was presided over by the Paundra leader Anukul Chandra Naskar, who was taking a leading role in the anti-Partition campaign in south Bengal.<sup>115</sup> The main speaker at this meeting was Mandal who opposed the Partition proposal on the ground that:

The scheduled castes will be the worst sufferers if there is any partition of Bengal. The caste-Hindus of east Bengal are wealthy and many of them are professionals. They will just leave east Bengal and come to west Bengal. Only the poor scheduled caste peasants, fishermen and traders will remain in east Bengal. So their proportion in the total population will further decline than in the present and they will have to survive at the mercy of the majority Muslim community.<sup>116</sup>

A resolution was passed at the meeting registering the determined opposition of the SCs to the Partition proposal. Later, in response to a question, Mandal further clarified that he did not 'visualise Bengal of the future as a province linked with either Pakistan or Hindustan, but as an independent Undivided Sovereign State.'<sup>117</sup> At this stage, he was supporting the campaign for autonomous united Bengal, spearheaded by the dissident Congress leader Sarat Chandra Bose and the maverick Muslim League leader Abul Hasem. It has been shown by a number of historians that in a charged atmosphere of 1947, this proposal had very limited support in Bengal.<sup>118</sup> This was not a position favoured by the Muslim League high command either. So, the Dalit-Muslim relations forged in 1946 were fraught with tension from the very beginning.

The situation was further complicated by Ambedkar's shifting position on the Pakistan issue. Although a supporter of the proposal in its initial phase, he became increasingly sceptical about it from late 1945. In his maiden speech at the CA on 15 December 1946, he expressed his optimism that 'notwithstanding the agitation of the Muslim League for the Partition of India someday enough light would dawn upon the Muslims themselves and they too will begin to think

that a United India is better even for them.’<sup>119</sup> On 27 April 1947, he issued a rather ambiguous statement on the proposed Partition of Punjab and Bengal. The AISCF had not come to any conclusion on the question of Partition, he announced; nor did it have any desire to prejudge the issue. The SCs would accept Partition if they were satisfied on three points. Firstly what protection would the new constitution of India offer to the SCs as compared to what the Muslims were prepared to offer? Secondly, where would the boundary line between the two states be drawn? And thirdly, if any SCs were left in Pakistan, would there be a plan for the exchange of population and proper economic rehabilitation? Unless these issues were resolved, he would not take a clear position, Ambedkar declared.<sup>120</sup> So the AISCF, it seemed, neither accepted Partition nor outright rejected it.

The ambivalence bolstered up Mandal’s detractors who were preparing to respond to this politics of space in a strikingly different way. P.R. Thakur asserted in a press statement on 27 April 1947 that:

As such Mr. Mandal has no right to say anything regarding the issue of Partition of Bengal, which is nothing but an offshoot of anti-Pakistan agitations. Even Dr. Ambedkar, who Mr. Mandal acclaims as his political “Guru” does not support Pakistan, what is more, Dr. Ambedkar is definitely in favour of Bengal Partition movement. Mr. Mandal’s pretension, therefore, to speak on behalf of the Scheduled Castes people of Bengal fall (sic) to the ground since his views of this crucial issue are at variance with the considered opinion not only of the Depressed Classes League but also the Depressed Classes Federation, two most representative and recognized organisation (sic) of the Scheduled Castes people all over India.

I should rather say that if Mr. Mandal had any sympathy for the wishes and sentiments of the SCs people of Bengal, he should have persuaded the Muslim League not to insist on Pakistan in Bengal but to work for a United Bengal under the Indian Union.<sup>121</sup>

Two points need to be underscored here. Thakur’s advocacy for Partition emanated from his opposition to the idea of Pakistan. Like Mandal, he too wanted Bengal to remain united, but his vision about the political future of this geopolitical space differed. While Mandal wanted to see it as a separate sovereign state, Thakur wanted it to be a part of India. Thus, the two leaders, who shared until recently the same social and political grounds, visualised the political future of their ancestral homeland in two very different ways.

This difference was mainly because many Dalit leaders in Bengal believed that the Dalit peasantry, particularly in the East, was already at the mercy of the majority Muslim community—the recent riots had confirmed it. Partition and the creation of a Hindu majority province in West Bengal was their only chance of political survival. Radhanath Das retorted to Mandal that he would ‘not be able to make them [the

Namasudra peasants] feel secure under Muslim League rule or Muslim League protection ... the backward Hindus will be better able than others to leave east Bengal, since they have few possessions besides their tiny huts.' If there was any need to partition Bengal, it was to safeguard the interests of the SCs.<sup>122</sup> Manoranjan Das, the Secretary of the Noakhali district Taposili Jati Samiti stated emphatically in a press statement in May 1947 that they had the bitter test of a Muslim League government during the recent riots, and so they would wholeheartedly support the division of Bengal to get rid of the Muslim League rule.<sup>123</sup> On behalf of the Rajbansis of north Bengal, the charge was led by a former minister Premhari Burman. He stated in a press statement that the SCs were more respectful of Hinduism than many varna Hindus. Hence, they attended in large numbers meetings in support of the Partition of Bengal. It was only Mr. Mandal, who was close to the League, and a few of his followers who opposed this demand.<sup>124</sup>

To counter Mandal's campaign, a large meeting was organised by the Depressed Classes League in Calcutta University Institute Hall on 27 May 1947, where speakers were Congress stalwarts like Rajendra Prasad and Jagjivan Ram. The resolution adopted at this conference emphatically claimed that: 'As the Muslim League is determined to include the entire Bengal in Pakistan ... this conference resolves that a Separate Province be formed comprising of the Bardwan (sic) Division, Presidency Division, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling districts, Calcutta and other willing Units under the All India Union.' A second resolution rejected the 'Sovereign Bengal or Free Bengal Scheme independent of the India Union'. And a third 'condemn[ed] the activities of Mr. Jogendra Nath Mandal ... [and] repudiate[d] his baseless Propaganda that the Scheduled Castes are not behind the Partition demand.'<sup>125</sup> The politics of space had thus unmistakably divided the Bengali Dalit community at this stage.

What is more important, this projected space for a 'Hindu homeland' was exponentially expanded to include the areas inhabited by the two large SC communities. In a letter dated 21 January 1947, P.R. Thakur wrote to Hemanta Sarkar, the general secretary of the West Bengal Provincial Committee on Partition, that as soon as the session of the CA was over, he would rush home to organise 'a big conference' demanding that 'Gopalganj [in Faridpur district in east Bengal] and the adjoining police station areas where the Hindus predominate[d] might be included in West Bengal'.<sup>126</sup> On 18 June, Thakur issued a press statement identifying all the thanas in the 'non-Muslim majority areas (where the Scheduled Castes predominates)' in the districts of Faridpur, Bakarganj, Jessore, and Khulna for being included to the proposed new Hindu province in India.<sup>127</sup> Similarly,



on 4 June at a meeting in Thakurgaon in Dinajpur district, attended by 4,000 people, mostly SCs, Premhari Burman, and other Rajbansi leaders of the district demanded that Dinajpur should be attached to the new province.<sup>128</sup> Thus, Thakur, Burman, and their compatriots were not only demanding the Partition of Bengal for the creation of a Hindu majority province within the territory of the Indian union, but they were also wanting their own habitational spaces to be incorporated into that new province. Eventually, as this movement gained further momentum, this 'homeland' was more clearly defined to include the Sadar and Pirojpur sub-divisions of Bakarganj district, Gopalganj sub-division of Faridpur district, and the adjoining Namasudra majority areas of Khulna and Jessore; as well as Dinajpur, Malda, and the adjoining Rajbansi dominated areas of Rangpur. The demand was for these two contiguous regions to be incorporated into the new province of West Bengal. A series of meetings were held in the interior of the east Bengal countryside in support of these demands.<sup>129</sup>

Suhrawardy and Mandal were however still claiming that the SCs would not support the Partition of Bengal as demanded by the Hindu Mahasabha. In support of this position, a few meetings were organised in the interior by the local branches of the AISC, where identical resolutions condemning the proposed Partition and upholding the united Bengal proposal were passed and forwarded to the Viceroy. We know of at least five such meetings held on 27 May at villages Jhanjali, Kathal, Purbadhala, Dhigunia, and Narundi, all under the auspices of the Mymensingh branch of the AISC, and another at Aguljhara in Bakarganj on 1 June.<sup>130</sup> *Jagaran*, the mouthpiece of the AISC Bengal branch, also reported several well-attended meetings addressed by Mandal and other leaders in western, central, and north Bengal districts.<sup>131</sup> Interestingly, this list does not include any meeting in the Namasudra heartland in eastern Bengal, e.g. districts like Dacca, Barisal, and Faridpur, where the pro-Partition campaign was gathering momentum.

What needs to be also mentioned here is that, at this stage, there were calculated moves on the part of all the mainstream political parties on both sides of the political divide to enlist the support of the SC population in Bengal. The Hindu *bhadralok* wanted to win over the Namasudras in their fight for 'Hindu homeland'. N.C. Chatterjee of Hindu Mahasabha did not forget to mention in his Presidential Address at the Tarakeswar conference that one of the advantages of the Partition scheme was that 'over 60 per cent of the members of the Scheduled Castes [of Bengal would] ... be in the New Province.' This meant that their 'economic and civic rights ... [would] be safeguarded.'<sup>132</sup> Atul Chandra Gupta pointed out to the Congress



President Acharya Kripalani, that in some of the areas of Barisal, Faridpur, Jessore, and Khulna the Namasudras accounted for 55 to 56 per cent of the population, and they were ‘dying to get out of Pakisthan (sic).’<sup>133</sup> On the other side of the spectrum, on 24 June 1947, the Bengal Premier H.S. Suhrawardy assured the SCs:

I can state with a certain degree of confidence that in framing the constitution [of Pakistan], the wishes of the Scheduled Castes will be given the utmost consideration, and if they desire separate electorates for the preservation of their political rights and culture, then there is little doubt that their wish will be fulfilled.<sup>134</sup>

Already Jinnah had accosted the Viceroy with the proposal of a referendum for Bengal ‘to give the Scheduled Castes the chance of expressing their dissatisfaction with caste Hindus’; but the Viceroy ‘refused to be drawn’ into any such conversation.<sup>135</sup>

On 1 May 1947, Thakur issued a press statement in which he declared the Partition of Bengal to be a ‘settled fact’ and assured his followers in east Bengal that:

They should not be disturbed by the false idea that they would be doomed for ever after the partition of Bengal. I can assure them that Hindu-India will pay their first and foremost attention of (sic) the solution of their acute problem.<sup>136</sup>

But how could he give such an assurance? The *Amrita Bazar Patrika* on 31 May 1947 reported that Thakur had a meeting with Gandhi, and he was given ‘a sympathetic hearing’. Gandhi supposedly gave him an assurance that he could ‘rest assured that the interests of Harijans in Bengal will not be allowed to be ignored in case Bengal’s Partition is finally decided upon.’ Gandhi also asked for a detailed note on the areas in Dacca Division where the SCs mainly lived.<sup>137</sup> Hindu Mahasabha leader Shyama Prasad Mukherji while campaigning for Partition in east Bengal villages also promised to stand with them if they faced adversities as a result of Partition.<sup>138</sup> Such promises remained alive in Dalit memory. A Dalit writer has recently suggested that Thakur accepted Partition only after he met Lord Mountbatten on the one hand and Gandhi, Nehru, and other Congress leaders on the other, to secure their assurance that if the Dalit peasants had to migrate from East Bengal, their rehabilitation would be taken care of.<sup>139</sup> With their assurance, Ramananda Das, the Secretary of the Depressed Classes League, issued an appeal to all SC MLAs ‘to cast their solid Votes in support of Bengal Partition for the best interest of the country and the community.’<sup>140</sup> On 20 June 1947, at the Bengal Legislative Assembly, twenty-five of the thirty SC MLAs voted for the Congress–Mahasabha sponsored resolution in support of the Partition

of Bengal.

We do not have any other documentary evidence to prove that such a solemn promise was ever made, even though verbally, by some of the founding fathers of the future Indian nation-state. But it was a significant moment of truth in this unfolding story of Partition and the East Bengal Dalit's position within that narrative. This idea of a contract has lived on in Dalit memory. P.R. Thakur mentioned it in a meeting in Habra on 28 March 1964 to express his sense of betrayal after his resignation from Congress.<sup>141</sup> Another Dalit writer, Kapil Krishna Thakur, wrote about it as late as 2007.<sup>142</sup> The Dalit's support for the Partition resolution, their subsequent claim for relief and rehabilitation after their migration in the 1950s, and their eventual sense of betrayal at being denied rehabilitation in West Bengal were all predicated upon this idea of promise. They thought they had an agreement with the Indian state, which was breached!

After having secured Partition, the attention of these Namasudra leaders of East Bengal focussed on the work of the Boundary Commission. Their main concern was to retain the SC-dominated areas of Bakarganj, Faridpur, Jessore, and Khulna within the proposed Hindu province of West Bengal. In support of this demand, a number of meetings were held in Calcutta. In the entire Dacca Division, great activities were reported during late June and early July, for presenting the case of the SC areas in Faridpur and Bakarganj. Such territorial claims were made outside East Bengal as well. A meeting of the Rajbansis of Dinajpur, held at Thakurgaon on 22 June, demanded the districts of Dinajpur, Malda, and such portions of Rangpur which were predominantly inhabited by the Rajbansis to be included in the new province of West Bengal. As against this pro-Partition campaign, evidence of counter mobilisation against Partition is also there.<sup>143</sup> Despite the apparent geographical absurdity of such territorial claims, the Hindu Mahasabha argued in support of the local Namasudras before the Boundary Commission for the inclusion of their traditional habitat in West Bengal.<sup>144</sup> Even the Congress Memorandum to the Boundary Commission listed these territories among the areas it claimed for West Bengal on the ground of being non-Muslim 'contiguous majority areas'—a criterion followed by the Commission for the apportionment of territories.<sup>145</sup>

But despite the political support of the nationalists, the Dalit in East Bengal did not get what they desired from the Partition. Ignoring their vehement pleas, all the East Bengal districts, which the Namasudras lived in, were allocated to East Pakistan. The Rajbansi habitat was divided down the middle.<sup>146</sup> 'A largely attended' meeting at Calcutta University Institute Hall on 26 August 1947 recorded its 'strong protest against the inclusion' of a 'large contiguous non-Muslim

majority area of the districts of Khulna, Jessore, Faridpur and Barisal' to East Bengal by the Radcliffe Award. A cross-caste but all Hindu 'Central Bengal Boundary Re-adjustment Committee' was set up with P.R. Thakur as the President.<sup>147</sup> But soon they found that once the award was announced, it was a done deal, and there was no possibility of revising it. On the other hand, Partition made Mandal sad as well, but for different reasons. In a statement issued by him on 4 June, possibly when Partition had become a foregone conclusion, he wrote:

Although I am sanguine that the Scheduled Caste people living in Pakistan, whose number will be a little over 8 millions, will get adequate political rights and privileges, about 52 millions of them who will be in Hindustan under the Congress regime will be deprived of what little political powers they are enjoying now.<sup>148</sup>

Whichever perspective we take, there is no denying that Partition had a huge impact on the identity and politics of the Bengali SCs, and it determined their future historical trajectory which we will discuss in the following chapters.

## Religion, Identity, and Space

In July 1946, Dr Ambedkar wrote to Winston Churchill that he wanted Prime Minister Clement Attlee to recognise the SCs as 'a political minority in their own right'.<sup>149</sup> This 'minority' was not defined in terms of religion, although pre-Partition politics of this period were so overwhelmingly defined by a discourse of religious-communal divide. The Dalit leaders in Bengal also defined their identity in political terms. On 19 December 1946, when the fires of communal riots in Calcutta and Noakhali had not yet been completely extinguished, the Bengal SC leader P.R. Thakur made a significant speech at the CA, seeking to define Dalit identity for post-colonial India and for Bengal, with considerable amount of clarity. The speech therefore deserves to be quoted at length.

Sir, in this big august House of the Constituent Assembly, we belonging to the Depressed Classes, are very few in number, but in the country as a whole our population is 60 millions. *We are no doubt a part and parcel of the great Hindu community.* But *our social status in the country is so very low* that we do feel that we require adequate safeguards to be provided for us. Firstly, *we should be considered as a minority*—a minority, not in the sense in which a community is a minority on religious or racial grounds, but a minority which is a separate political entity. It is needless however to point out that *we are a separate political entity.*

There are Depressed Classes in all the Provinces and in the States of India. They *want representation on a population basis in the Legislatures* . ... They do not claim any weightage, but if any weightage is given to any community, they demand proportional weightage for them.

We the Depressed Classes are *the original inhabitants of this country* . ... India belongs to us and we cannot tolerate the idea that this ancient mother country of ours will be divided between the Muslims and the Caste Hindus only.

I come from Bengal. Many of you might have heard of the civil disturbances over there. The Depressed Classes were the worst sufferers. We strongly repudiate any claim of the Muslim League to take away our beloved Bengal and constitute her into Pakistan ... *We shall fight tooth and nail to maintain the integrity of India intact*. I hope better sense will prevail on Muslim League soon.

In this connection I cannot but say that the leaders of the Muslim League in Bengal are trying to get the support of a section of the Depressed Classes ... I think they are doing it just to pave the way for their fantastic Pakistan. But, fortunately, this section of the Depressed Classes is very small. I do hope that this Constituent Assembly will see that nothing is done in regard to Bengal without the consent of the Depressed Classes. They are of overwhelming number.<sup>150</sup>

Thakur thus made a few points clear about Dalit identity and politics in Bengal on the eve of Partition and decolonisation. He claimed them to be Hindus, but a minority in a political sense—not in a religious or racial sense—deserving protection of their political rights through proportional representation in the legislatures. They were against the Muslim League and its Pakistan campaign and were against any form of Partition. But they were also divided on this issue, Thakur admitted, as there were at least a few among the SCs who thought differently on identity and political alliance.

There were also others who shared his views. Manmohan Das, a leader of the Depressed Classes League, declared at a meeting in Calcutta on 27 May 1947 that ‘they were Hindu first and Hindu last’. But he also hoped that ‘in the new Bengal there would be no social or other distinctions between man and man.’<sup>151</sup> In a statement on 26 November, another SC MLA Bejoy Krishna Sarkar alleged that Jogendranath Mandal, inspired by his mentor Ambedkar, was contemplating giving up Hinduism. ‘But it is true’, he contended, ‘the Scheduled Castes will never relinquish their Hindutva like cowards or relinquish Hindu tradition and Hindu culture.’<sup>152</sup>

But what Mandal was actually saying about identity at this historical juncture? His disagreement with Thakur was not profound, it seems, but politically critical. In his Presidential Address at the Fourth Annual Conference of the AISCF on 31 December 1946 in Calcutta, he gave an indication of his mind: ‘though we are Hindu, we are totally different from the caste Hindus in economic and social

matters'. And that was the reason he and the AISCF demanded separate electorate and would not go with the caste Hindus and Congress, who denied them this right. They had joined hands with the Muslim League, he argued, because it had promised them separate electorate.<sup>153</sup> Around this time, there was intense propaganda against him for his alignment with the Muslim League and his nomination to the Interim Government as a Muslim League nominee. To counter that, at a public meeting in Calcutta on 16 May 1947, he emphatically said that he thought of himself as a 'Hindu'. Even though he was nominated by the Muslim League, he was a Hindu before and would remain a Hindu in the future. But within the Hindu community, the SCs were a 'separate political entity', and this fact was the foundation of their demand for proportional representation, economic freedom, and reservation in education and public employment. His Congress SC colleagues also demanded the same things, he agreed, but while they sought to assert their distinctive identity through general electorate, he and his party demanded separate electorate. And they did not see any contradiction between their Hindu identity and the separate electorate.<sup>154</sup>

*Jagaran*, the mouthpiece of the AISCF in Bengal, published an article on 30 June 1947, criticising Gandhi's position that the SCs would not remain Hindu if they were granted a separate electorate. There could not be a more senseless reason than this, it argued. For, 'even if the Scheduled Castes temporarily get separate electorate because of their economic and educational backwardness among the Hindus, they will never be separated from the Hindu religion.'<sup>155</sup> So like Thakur, Mandal, and the AISCF in Bengal were also making a distinction between their religious identity and political rights. They too located their identity within a broader Hindu social space, but on the basis of their political position, they demanded protective safeguards of affirmative action and separate electorate. They did not see any apparent contradiction between the two; the only problem was Congress refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of their political demands. And that refusal justified an alliance with the Muslim League.

While commenting on this alliance, a letter to the editor in *Jagaran* argued that for a long historical period, Muslim and SC peasants in East Bengal had been living side by side, ploughing the same land, sharing the same lifestyle; it did not affect their caste status. Then why was it not appropriate for them to unite politically in the Interim Government?<sup>156</sup> On 3 November 1946, at a reception meeting for him at Jumma Masjid in Delhi, Mandal made it clear why such a grand coalition was in the interest of the underprivileged minorities. The Muslim League, he argued, was fighting for the freedom and progress

of not just the Muslims, but of all the minority groups. If all the SC, tribal, and Muslim people could unite, there was no force in the country that could ever dominate them.<sup>157</sup> However, this alliance was not unconditional; in another speech, he made it clear that if the Muslim League did anything against the interests of the SC, he would at once come out of the Interim Government.<sup>158</sup>

However, if we move away from their public political posturing on identity and look at their private social lives, it will be clear that the Dalit in Bengal, like their counterparts in other parts of the country, wore their religion thinly.<sup>159</sup> Their everyday religious lives were not locked into a Hindu–non-Hindu structural binary, but resided at the interstices of multiple religious belief structures and folk practices of rural Bengal. For example, P.R. Thakur in his autobiography gives a detailed description of the religious life in his own household as well as in his village in Faridpur. His great-grandfather Harichand Thakur and his grandfather Guruchand Thakur were the founders of a Dalit heterodox religious sect called Matua, which incorporated an anti-caste philosophy of emancipatory transcendentalism.<sup>160</sup> Most of the Namasudras in rural East Bengal were followers of this sect. But in his household, Thakur mentions the observance of a variety of religious festivities which he lumps together under the generic rubric of '*Hindur puja parban*' or the religious festivals of the Hindus. These included even Durga puja, the most popular festival of the Bengali Hindus. But this was puja of a different kind, where people of all castes, including even Muslims, were invited.<sup>161</sup> On the other hand, while Jogendranath was an atheist in his personal belief, as his son Jagadish Mandal tells us, in his household, the everyday folk Hindu ritual of Lakshmi puja was regularly performed, because it was a family 'tradition', followed for generations.<sup>162</sup> It was not Hinduism in its textual form; it was religion in its most private, personal and quotidian form, which had little connection with their articulated political identities.

But what about the Dalit peasants in the East Bengal countryside? Another Dalit autobiography by Manohar Mouli Biswas, describing religious life in a remote Namasudra village in Khulna in the 1940s, provides us with an elaborate description of Durga puja in the village. But this was a puja performed by an inferior Brahman priest, and here more prominent was the social carnivalesque spirit, rather than its ritualistic rigours. And these Namasudras rarely followed any Hindu religious/social restrictions: they relished pork, celebrated widow remarriage, and 'did not observe many of the rites and rituals of the Hindus'. As Biswas writes, nothing happened in their family household that could attract him to religion: 'Not religion, it was poverty that hung like a sword over the head.' And in their struggle against

poverty, they were comrades in arms with their Muslim neighbours. So, when Partition came, these Namasudras failed to understand why they could not live alongside the Muslims any longer, although they did so for ages, despite occasional conflicts.<sup>163</sup>

However, this narrative of harmony at the grassroots level can be further complicated by citing a few anecdotes from other Dalit autobiographies. Haripada Roy (previously Mridha) belonged to a landowning middle peasant Namasudra family in Pirojpur, Barisal. He too mentions that: 'Another feature of our community was that there was no religious superstition among us; no obsession with religion. Our women were free. There were no purdah or dowry system.' However, he also mentions an episode which shows his inherited social prejudices. Once as a child he was invited by a Muslim gentleman to dine in his house. His instant reaction was: 'I will not dine in a Muslim household.'<sup>164</sup> Such commensality restrictions were possibly not unknown in upwardly mobile Namasudra peasant families seeking social legitimisation. Jatin Bala's autobiography also mentions his sense of astonishment as a child when he was told by his father that they could not eat food cooked in the kitchen of a close Muslim family friend. He describes in detail the extant notions of social distance, despite friendships with their Muslim neighbours.<sup>165</sup> However, Haripada Roy also mentions that years later when he went to Chingrikhali School in Khulna, he found to his dismay that although the majority of students were either Muslim or Namasudras, they were not allowed to participate in the school Saraswati puja. He organised his friends to agitate against it and from then on all students, 'irrespective of religion and caste', began to participate in the festival.<sup>166</sup> However, it is also possible that these patterns of community relations were shifting on the eve of Partition, as another Dalit autobiography noted that in Barisal around this time, 'both high-caste and low-caste Hindus applied the same touch-me-not attitude to the Muslims who felt hurt by Hindu apartheid.'<sup>167</sup>

These anecdotes and observations indicate that it is difficult to pin down Dalit identity on the eve of Partition into a simple structured religious binary—and identify them as either Hindu or non-Hindu, and their alliance with the Muslims also had some latent tension. It is also impossible to separate the sacred from the secular in their everyday lived experiences, where such lines were perennially fuzzy. Religion had little to do with their responses to Partition politics, which had made their local community relationships entangled in subcontinental politics of communal polarisation, imputing different meanings into their ancestral habitational spaces. We need to understand their participation in Partition politics within this context of a complex relationship between subalternity, religion, identity,



space, and political mobilisation.

<sup>1</sup> This community has been studied in detail in Swaraj Basu, *Dynamics of a Caste Movement: The Rajbansis of North Bengal, 1910–1947*, New Delhi, Manohar, 2003; Rup Kumar Barman, *Contested Regionalism: A New Look on the History, Cultural Change and Regionalism of North Bengal and Lower Assam*, Delhi, Abhijeet Publications, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> This community has been studied in detail in Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872–1947*, Second edition, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> See Neha Chatterji, ‘Sacred Calling, Worldly Bargain: Caste, Self-cultivation and Mobilisation in Late Colonial Bengal’, Unpublished PhD thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2017, 188.

<sup>4</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York, Vintage Books, 1979, 54–55.

<sup>5</sup> Doreen B. Massey, *For Space*, London, Sage, 2005, 9–10.

<sup>6</sup> For details, see Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*; and Basu, *Dynamics of a Caste Movement*.

<sup>55</sup> Full text of Mr. Liaquat Ali Khan’s address at the Press conference, Enclosure 1 to Pethic-Lawrence to Viceroy Wavell, 18 October 1946, IOR: L/PO/10/23.

<sup>56</sup> Mandal, *Mahapran Jogendranath*, 90.

<sup>57</sup> See Bandyopadhyay, ‘Orchestrating a Signal Victory’, 57, note 94.

<sup>58</sup> Chairez-Garza, ‘“Bound Hand and Foot ...”’, 9.

<sup>59</sup> For details, see Bandyopadhyay, ‘Orchestrating a Signal Victory’.

<sup>60</sup> A.K. Biswas has claimed that seven SC MLAs voted for Ambedkar and they were: Jogendranath Mandal (AISCF), Mukunda Behari Mullick (Independent), Dwarikanath Baruri (Congress), Gayanath Biswas (Congress), Kshetranath Singha (Congress), Bir Birsa (Congress), Nagendra Narayan Ray (Independent). Since he does not cite any source, it is difficult to verify this information. See A.K. Biswas, ‘How the Bengali Chotalok Shaped India’s Destiny’, *Forward Press*, 20 November 2016, <https://www.forwardpress.in/category/society/>, accessed on 20.01.2020.

<sup>61</sup> See their statement in IB, S. No. 97/46, F. No. 191/46, WBSA.

<sup>7</sup> The Communal Award announced in 1932 had offered the Depressed Classes—to be henceforth known as the SC—ten seats in the Bengal Legislative Assembly to be filled in through a separate electorate. But when Gandhi started his fast unto death to get the provision of a separate electorate annulled, Ambedkar signed the Poona Pact to save his life and accepted reserved seats in a joint electorate. The Government of India Act of 1935, which incorporated the provisions of the Poona Pact, gave the Bengal SCs thirty reserved seats—instead of ten—in a joint electorate. There would be a two-tier voting procedure for these seats. In the primary election, only the SC voters would vote for SC candidates. The top four candidates chosen through this round would then contest in the general constituency in which both SC and non-SC voters would be voting.

<sup>8</sup> Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj: Bengal 1872–1937*, Calcutta, K.P. Bagchi & Co, 1990, 180–81, Appendix IV.

<sup>9</sup> See for details, Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 198–203.

<sup>10</sup> Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal*, New Delhi, Impex India, 1976, 173, note 4.



- <sup>11</sup> Extract from File 1164-44 Genl., IB, F. No. 191/46, WBSA.
- <sup>12</sup> For a recent discussion on the Paundra movement, see Chatterji, 'Sacred Calling, Worldly Bargain'.
- <sup>13</sup> S.S.1, IB, F. No. 191/46, WBSA. There was also a third inconsequential small group, known as the Depressed Classes Association, led by another Namasudra MLA, Birat Chandra Mandal, who was known to have been close to the Hindu Mahasabha.
- <sup>14</sup> A short note on (1) All India Depressed Classes League and (2) All India Scheduled Castes Federation [dated October 1945], IB, F. No. 191/46, WBSA.
- <sup>15</sup> Government of India (GI), Press Information Bureau, 'The General Elections (1945–46) The Legislative Assembly—Bengal', 23 May 1946, GI, Reforms Office, F. No. 106/3/45-R, NAI.
- <sup>16</sup> Ramnarayan S. Rawat, 'Making Claims for Power: A New Agenda in Dalit Politics of Uttar Pradesh, 1946–48', *Modern Asian Studies*, 37:3, July 2003, 595.
- <sup>17</sup> Dwaipayan Sen, "'No Matter How Jogendranath Had to be Defeated': The Scheduled Castes Federation and the Making of Partition of Bengal, 1945–1947", *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 49:3, 2012, 344.
- <sup>18</sup> Masayuki Usuda, "'Pushed Towards the Partition": Jogendranath Mandal and the Constrained Namasudra Movement', in H. Kotani, ed., *Caste System, Untouchability and the Depressed*, New Delhi, Manohar, 1997, 240–43.
- <sup>19</sup> See Sen, 'No Matter How', 332.
- <sup>20</sup> R.G. Casey to Wavell, 7 January 1946, IOR: L/P&J/5/152.
- <sup>21</sup> Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Culture and Hegemony: Social Dominance in Colonial Bengal*, New Delhi, Sage, 2004, 219.
- <sup>22</sup> Viceroy to Secretary of State, 1 October 1945, IOR: L/PO/10/22: Weekly Letters, Secretary of State, vol. II, 1945; Paper cutting, *The Hindustan Times*, 8 April 1946, IOR: L/P&J/8.475.
- <sup>23</sup> Pethic-Lawrence to Burrows, 8 April 1946, IOR: L/PO/2/9(ii): Correspondence with Governors.
- <sup>24</sup> J.D. Tyson, Secy. to the Governor of Bengal to the Under Secretary of State for India, 1 February 1946, IOR: L/PJ/7/10113.
- <sup>25</sup> Burrows to Pethic-Lawrence, 5 April 1946, IOR: L/PO/2/9(ii): Correspondence with Governors.
- <sup>26</sup> Quoted in Jagadish Chandra Mandal, *Mahapran Jogendranath o Babasaheb Ambedkar*, Kolkata, Biswas Publisher, 1999, 65.
- <sup>27</sup> Quoted in S. Kuwazima, *Muslims, Nationalism and the Partition: 1946 Provincial Elections in India*, New Delhi, Manohar, 1998, 134.
- <sup>28</sup> See Anita Inder Singh, *The Origins of the Partition of India 1936–1947*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1987, 136.
- <sup>29</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 1 March 1946, quoted in Anirban Bandyopadhyay, 'Orchestrating a Signal Victory: Ambedkar, Mandal and 1946 Constituent Assembly Election', in B. Pati, ed., *Invoking Ambedkar: Contributions, Reception, Legacies*, New Delhi, Primus, 2014, 44.
- <sup>30</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, 'The Cabinet Mission and the Untouchables', Ambedkar Papers, File No. 9, Part 1–2, Roll No. 3, NMML.
- <sup>31</sup> Jagadish Chandra Mandal, *Banga Bhanga* (Partition of Bengal), Calcutta, Mahapran Publishing Society, 1383 BS [1990], 39–41.
- <sup>32</sup> Kuwazima, *Muslims, Nationalism and the Partition*, 167–68.
- <sup>33</sup> Azad complained bitterly about the contempt with which Jinnah and other non-Congress Muslims treated him after the Simla Conference of 1945. See Viceroy to Under Secretary of State for India, 9 July 1945; also see Viceroy to

L.S. Amery, 22 July 1945 for reference to 'show boys'. IOR: L/PO/10/22: Weekly Letters, Secretary of State, vol. II, 1945.

<sup>34</sup> This meant two-thirds share of the produce claimed by the sharecroppers.

<sup>35</sup> Memorandum on the elections to the seats reserved for the Scheduled Castes in the Provincial Assemblies, IOR: L/P&J/10/50.

<sup>36</sup> Adrienne Cooper, *Sharecropping and Sharecroppers' Struggles in Bengal 1930–1950*, Calcutta, K.P. Bagchi & Co. 1988, 260.

<sup>37</sup> For details on Tebhaga movement and Dalit peasant participation, see Cooper, *Sharecropping and Sharecroppers' Struggles*; Basu, *Dynamics of a Caste Movement*, 126–29; Sugato Bose, *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure and Politics 1919–1947*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986, 256–73; Sunil Sen, *Peasant Movements in India: Mid-Nineteenth and Twentieth Century*, Calcutta, K.P. Bagchi & Co., 1982, 76–77; Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 229–37.

<sup>38</sup> By way of criticising Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's earlier position that the electoral debacle of the AISC was due to inadequacy of the organisation, Jesus Francisco Chairez-Garza has recently pointed out that the defeat was because of an 'uneven playing field'. See his, '“Bound Hand and Foot and Handed Over to the Caste Hindus”: Ambedkar, Untouchability and the Politics of Partition', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 55:1, 2018, 5. For the original argument of Bandyopadhyay, see 'Transfer of Power and the Crisis of Dalit Politics in India, 1945–47', *Modern Asian Studies*, 34:4, 2000, 912–18.

<sup>39</sup> For election results, see IOR: L/P&J/10/50 and L/P&J/8/475.

<sup>40</sup> Sen, 'No Matter How', 330.

<sup>41</sup> The only exception was the south 24-Parganas where the Paundra Kshatriyas kept the flag flying. But they were mostly on the Congress side. See Chatterji, 'Sacred Calling, Worldly Bargain'.

<sup>42</sup> For these election results, see IOR: L/P&J/10/50 and L/P&J/8/475.

<sup>43</sup> 'Memorandum on the elections to the seats reserved for the Scheduled Castes in the Provincial Assemblies,' IOR: L/P&J/10/50. For more analysis of this election result for AISC on a national scale, see Bandyopadhyay, 'Transfer of Power', 912–18.

<sup>44</sup> Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*, New Delhi, Permanent Black, 2011, 159

<sup>45</sup> For details of this movement, see, Bandyopadhyay, 'Transfer of Power', 924–30; Rawat, 'Making Claims for Power', 597–99.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Jagadish Chandra Mandal, *Mahapran Jogendranath (Jogendranath: the Noble Soul)*, vol. I, Calcutta, Chaturtha Duniya, 1382 BS [1989], 80–81.

<sup>47</sup> Copy of SBDN dt. 21 August 1946; Azad, 24 August 1946, IB, S. No. 97/46, F. No. 191/46, WBSA.

<sup>48</sup> B.P.A., dt. 31 August 1946, IB, S. No. 97/46, F. No. 191/46, WBSA.

<sup>49</sup> B.P.A., dt. 14 September 1946, IB, S. No. 97/46, F. No. 191/46, WBSA.

<sup>50</sup> Azad, 4 September 1946, IB, S. No. 97/46, F. No. 191/46, WBSA.

<sup>51</sup> M.K. Gandhi to Lord Mountbatten, 27 June 1947, IOR: L/PO/6/123. Part 2.

<sup>52</sup> Cutting from the 'Dawn' dt. 19 August 1946, IOR: L/PO/10/23: Weekly Letters, Secretary of State, vol. III.

<sup>53</sup> Viceroy-Jinnah correspondence: Mr. Jinnah's reply, dt. 31 July 1946, IOR: L/PO/10/23.

<sup>54</sup> Paper cutting from *Dawn*, 19 August 1946, IOR: L/PO/10/23: Weekly

Letters, Secretary of State, vol. III.

<sup>62</sup> See for details, [Bandyopadhyay, Caste, Protest and Identity](#), chapters 1–2.

<sup>63</sup> For details on the riots of 1941, see Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal, 1905–47*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1991, Chapters 5–6.

<sup>64</sup> For Khulna riot, see [Bandyopadhyay, Caste, Protest and Identity](#), 218.

<sup>65</sup> Dwaipayan Sen, *The Decline of the Caste Question: Jogendranath Mandal and the Defeat of Dalit Politics in Bengal*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, 115–17.

<sup>66</sup> For more details of Hindu mobilisation, see [Bandyopadhyay, Caste, Protest and Identity](#), 218–24.

<sup>67</sup> Sen, *The Decline of the Caste Question*, 139–40.

<sup>68</sup> For details of the Calcutta riot, see Das, *Communal Riots*, 161–92; Janam Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal: War, Famine and the End of Empire*, London, Hurst & Co., 2015, 219–50; and Nariaki Nakazato, ‘The Role of Colonial Administration, “Riot Systems” and Local Networks During the Calcutta Disturbances of August 1946’, in T. Sarkar and S. Bandyopadhyay, eds., *Calcutta: The Stormy Decades*, New Delhi, Social Science Press, 2015, 267–319.

<sup>69</sup> For details on the Noakhali riot, see Das, *Communal Riots*, 192–203 and Debjani Sengupta, *The Partition of Bengal: Fragile Borders and New Identities*, Delhi, Cambridge University Press, 2016, 68–116.

<sup>70</sup> See ‘Report on Calcutta Riot’, ‘Noakhali Situation After Calcutta Killing and Remedies Suggested’, ‘A short report of the communal devastations in the District of Noakhali’ in AICC Papers (1st Instalment), Part II, F. No. G-53, NMML. For Mahasabha, see ‘Short Report of Hindu Mahasabha Relief Activities During “Calcutta Killing” And “Noakhali Carnage”’, <http://www.archive.org/details/shortreportofhinOOsirn>.

<sup>71</sup> *Calcutta Disturbances Commission of Enquiry Minutes of Evidence*, vols. I–XI, Calcutta, Supdt. Govt. Printing Bengal, n.d.

<sup>72</sup> For an excellent discussion on this, see Janam Mukherjee, ‘Japan Attacks’, in T. Sarkar and S. Bandyopadhyay, eds., *Calcutta: The Stormy Decades*, New Delhi, Social Science Press, 2015, 113.

<sup>73</sup> Names of victims such as Uma Kanta Mandal, Sahadeb Mandal, Dulal Chandra Nath, Batakrishna Mandal, Subodh Chandra Nath, Anukul Mandal, Sanyasi Charan Bacher, Gobardhan Naskar, Narayan Mandal, Sudhanya Mandal, Prasad Karmakar, and Sudhanya Naskar certainly sound like lower-caste names. See, Special Report Case No. 225/46, Report I, dt. 6 September 1946, by Supdt. of Police, 24-Parganas; also, Enclosure 2 to Report I, dt. 6 September 1946: ‘A brief statement of the communal incidents in 24-Parganas District following the “Direct Action” Day’, in IB, F. No. 717-46 (24-Parganas), WBSA.

<sup>74</sup> From Radhanath Das, President, Calcutta Leather Workers’ Union, to Acharya Kripalani, Congress President, 5 May 1947, AICC Papers (1st Instalment), F. No. CL-8/1946, NMML.

<sup>75</sup> Governor of Bengal to Secretary of State, 16 October 1946, IOR: L/P&J/8/578.

<sup>76</sup> ‘Notes for Supplementaries’, IOR: L/P&J/8/578.

<sup>77</sup> Governor of Bengal to Secretary of State, 21 October 1946, IOR: L/P&J/8/578.

<sup>78</sup> ‘MR. J.N. MANDAL ON COMMUNAL OUTBREAK IN EAST BENGAL’, Information Department, India Office (Telegram A.3602 from the Press Information Bureau, New Delhi, dt. 25 October 1946), IOR: L/P&J/8/578.

<sup>79</sup> Governor of Bengal to Secretary of State, 17 October 1946, IOR: L/

P&J/8/578.

<sup>80</sup> 'MR. ACHARYA KRIPALANI ON DISORDERS IN EAST BENGAL', Information Department, India Office (Telegram A.3616 from the Press Information Bureau, New Delhi, dt. 28 October 1946), IOR: L/P&J/8/578.

<sup>81</sup> Fortnightly Confidential Report for Chittagong Division for the period ending 7 March 1941, Parts II and III; Fortnightly Confidential Report for Bengal for the second half of March 1941, Government of Bengal, Home (Political) Confidential, F. No. 13/41, WBSA.

<sup>82</sup> Governor of Bengal to Secretary of State, 16 October 1946, IOR: L/P&J/8/578.

<sup>83</sup> *Nationalist*, dt. 15 November 1946, IB, S. No. 97/46, F. No. 191-46, WBSA.

<sup>84</sup> 'Rajbhoj's Tour Impression in Noakhali', IB, S. No. 97/46, F. No. 191-46, WBSA.

<sup>85</sup> 'Diary of Events and of Acharya Kripalani's Tour in Noakhali and Tipperah Districts, East Bengal, October 1946', AICC Papers (1st Instalment), Part II, F. No. P-5, 1946-47, NMML.

<sup>86</sup> Telegram from Camp Himachar, Tipperah District, 18th December 1946, AICC Papers (1st Instalment), F. No. CL-8/1946, NMML.

<sup>87</sup> *Sengupta, The Partition of Bengal*, 87, 91.

<sup>88</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika*, 28 May 1947.

<sup>89</sup> Mandal, *Mahapran Jogendranath*, 108.

<sup>90</sup> *The Pioneer*, 25 February 1947.

<sup>91</sup> *Azad*, 4 September 1946, IB, S. No. 97/46, F. No. 191/46, WBSA.

<sup>92</sup> 'Muslim Atrocities on Scheduled Caste', paper cutting, IB, S. No. 211/46, F. No. 581/46, WBSA.

<sup>93</sup> Extract from HS, dt. 27 August 1946, IB, S. No. 97/46, F. No. 191-46, WBSA.

<sup>94</sup> *Sen, Decline of the Caste Question*, 156-57.

<sup>95</sup> Special Report Case No. 225/46, Report II, dt. 14 December 1946, by Supdt. of Police, 24-Parganas, IB, F. No. 717-46 (24-Parganas), WBSA.

<sup>96</sup> Special Report Case No. 225/46, Report III, dt. 8 May 1947, by Supdt. of Police, 24-Parganas, IB, F. No. 717-46 (24-Parganas), WBSA.

<sup>97</sup> Dist. Intelligence Branch, Noakhali to Supdt. of Police, CID, Bengal, dt. 8 January 1947, IB, F. 717-46(5), WBSA.

<sup>98</sup> 'Extracts from the General Comments on the communal situation of Faridpur District for the week noted against each, as incorporated under the weekly appreciation of parties', IB, F. No. 717-46(5), WBSA.

<sup>99</sup> Supdt. of Police, D.I.B., Bakarganj to the Spl. Supdt. of Police, IB, CID, Bengal, Calcutta, dt. 18 October 1946, IB, F. No. 717-46(5), WBSA.

<sup>100</sup> 'Appreciation of the communal situation of the Dacca District', by Addl. Supdt. of Police, D.I.B., dt. 19 October 1946, IB, F. No. 717-46(5), WBSA.

<sup>101</sup> Supdt. of Police, D.I.B., Mymensingh to Spl. Supdt. of Police, Intelligence Branch, CID, Bengal, dt. 14 October 1946, IB, F. No. 717-46(5), WBSA.

<sup>102</sup> Abstract dt. 16 November 1946, IB, F. No. 717D-46, WBSA.

<sup>103</sup> 'English translation of a Bengali printed leaflet entitled "Musalman bhai boner proti" (To the Muslim Brothers and Sisters) ...', IB, F. No. 717D-46, WBSA.

<sup>104</sup> Copy of a letter from Hemanta Kumar Sarkar, Gen. Secy., West Bengal Provincial Committee to Shankarrao Deo, Congress Office, dt. 13 January 47, IB, F. No. 1128-46(1), WBSA.

<sup>105</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 3 February 1947.

<sup>106</sup> Copy of a letter from Lakshmi Kanta Sengupta, Gen. Secy. Barisal District Hindu Mahasabha to Dinendra Nath Mukherji, Gen. Secy. Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha, dt. 18 February 1947, IB, F. No. 1128-46(1), WBSA; also see *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 21 February 1947.

<sup>107</sup> For details, see Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932–1947*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, 220–68.

<sup>108</sup> Usuda, ‘Pushed Towards the Partition’, 221–74; Urvasi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, London, Hurst & Co., 2000, 254.

<sup>109</sup> *The Statesman*, 23 April 1947, in [Mandal, \*Banga Bhanga\*](#), 13–17.

<sup>110</sup> [Mandal, \*Banga Bhanga\*](#), 17.

<sup>111</sup> Extract from Dinajpur WCR for w/e 17. May 1947; ‘Copy of letter (English) from Kanai Lal Biswas, member, Working Committee, Scheduled Caste Federation, Bengal ... to the Secretary, Sadar Sub-Divisional Muslim League, Krishnagar, Nadia—intercepted at Krishnagar ... on 8 May 1947, in IB, F. No. 1128-46(1), WBSA.

<sup>112</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 27 May 1947, quoted in [Mandal, \*Banga Bhanga\*](#), 33–34.

<sup>113</sup> K.P. Mazumder, Gen. Secy., Bengal Provincial Scheduled Castes’ Federation, to Private Secretary to Viceroy, 14 May 1947, GI, Reforms Office, F. No. 41/3/47-R, Part III, NAI.

<sup>114</sup> [Mandal, \*Banga Bhanga\*](#), 23.

<sup>115</sup> S. K. Biswas, *Hari-Guruchand: Banglar Chandal o Bharatbarsher Bahujan Abhyuththan* (Hari-Guruchand: The Chandals of Bengal and the Rise of the Indian Bahujan), Delhi, Orion Books, 2004, 178–79.

<sup>116</sup> Quoted in [Mandal, \*Banga Bhanga\*](#), 26.

<sup>117</sup> *The Statesman*, 17 May 1947, quoted in [Mandal, \*Banga Bhanga\*](#), 29.

<sup>118</sup> For more details on these movements, see [Chatterji, \*Bengal Divided\*](#), 240–65; [Bandyopadhyay, \*Caste, Culture and Hegemony\*](#), Chapter 5.

<sup>119</sup> Quoted in Chairez-Garza, ‘“Bound Hand and Foot ...”’, 23.

<sup>120</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 28 April 1947, cited in [Mandal, \*Banga Bhanga\*](#), 18.

<sup>121</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 28 April 1947, cited in [Mandal, \*Banga Bhanga\*](#), 18.

<sup>122</sup> Quoted in Jagadish Chandra Mandal, *Rupkathar Rupokar Guruchand Thakur (Guruchand Thakur: A Character From Mythology)*, Kolkata, Author, 1413 BS [2007], 49.

<sup>123</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika*, 28 May 1947.

<sup>124</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika*, 28 May 1947.

<sup>125</sup> Ramananda Das, Secy., Bengal Provincial Depressed Classes League, to Governor General of India, dt. 30 May 1947, AICC Papers (Ist Instalment), F. No. CL-14©/1946–47, NMML. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 29 May 1947, cited in [Mandal, \*Banga Bhanga\*](#), 35–40.

<sup>126</sup> Copy of a letter dt. 21 January 1947 from P.R. Thakur to Hemanta Kumar Sarkar, Gen. Secy., West Bengal Provincial Committee, IB, F. No. 1128-46(1), WBSA.

<sup>127</sup> *Hindustan Standard*, 19 June 1947.

<sup>128</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 11 June 1947.

<sup>129</sup> For details on this campaign in the east Bengal countryside, see [Bandyopadhyay, \*Caste, Protest, Identity\*](#), 224–29. For more evidence see, AICC Papers (Ist Instalment), Part II, F. Nos. CL-14(B), CL-14(C), and CL-14(D), Part 1, NMML.

<sup>130</sup> Proceedings of these meetings may be found in GI, Reforms Office, F. No. 41/3/47-R, Part III, NAI; also, from Bepin Chandra Halder to the Governor-

General of India, 1 June 1947, GI, Reforms Office, F. No. 41/3/47-R, Part IV, NAI.

<sup>131</sup> For such reports in *Jagaran*, see *Sen, Decline of the Caste Question*, 170–73.

<sup>132</sup> Quoted in *Chatterji, Bengal Divided*, 241.

<sup>133</sup> From Atul Chandra Gupta to Acharya Kripalani, dt. 12 July 1947, AICC Papers (Ist Instalment), Part II, F. No. G-33, 1947, NMML. For more evidence on this, *Bandyopadhyay, Caste, Culture and Hegemony*, 191–239.

<sup>134</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 24 June 1947.

<sup>135</sup> Viceroy's Personal Report No. 8, 5 June 1947, IOR: L/PO/6/123, Part 2.

<sup>136</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 3 May 1947, quoted in Mandal, *Rupkathar Rupokar*, 17.

<sup>137</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 31 May 1947, cited in *Mandal, Banga Bhanga*, 46.

<sup>138</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika*, 20 April 1950.

<sup>139</sup> Kapil Krishna Thakur, 'Dalits of East Bengal: Before and After Partition', in B. Chatterjee and D. Chatterjee, eds., *Dalit Lives and Dalit Visions in Eastern India*, Kolkata, Centre for Rural Resources, 2007, 31.

<sup>140</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 19 June 1947, cited in *Mandal, Banga Bhanga*, 58.

<sup>141</sup> 'A note on Shri Pramatha Ranjan Thakur ... of Thakur Colony, P.S. Gaighata, 24-Parganas', IB, F. No. 2076-50, WBSA.

<sup>142</sup> This Kapil Krishna Thakur was not P.R. Thakur's eldest son who had the same name.

<sup>143</sup> These territorial claims and meetings in support of them have been narrated in detail in Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Culture and Hegemony: Social Dominance in Colonial Bengal*, New Delhi, Sage, 2004, 230–34.

<sup>144</sup> See Joya Chatterji, *The spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947–1967*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, 35

<sup>145</sup> Memorandum on the Partition of Bengal Presented on behalf of the Indian National Congress before the Bengal Boundary Commission, AICC Papers (Ist Instalment), F. No. CL-14D/1946 (Part II), NMML.

<sup>146</sup> See 'Report of the Bengal Boundary Commission', GI, Reforms Office, F. No. 68/47-R, NAI.

<sup>147</sup> H.C. Sen to Acharya Kripalani, 11 November 1947, AICC Papers (Ist Instalment), Part II, F. No. G-33, 1947, NMML.

<sup>148</sup> Statement signed by J.N. Mandal, dt. 4.6.47. We are indebted to his son Jagadish Chandra Mandal for a typed copy of this document.

<sup>149</sup> Cited in Chairez-Garza, '“Bound Hand and Foot ...”', 19–20.

<sup>150</sup> *Constituent Assembly Debate*, vol. 1, Part 2, 139–40. Italics added.

<sup>151</sup> Quoted in *Mandal, Banga Bhanga*, 40.

<sup>152</sup> Quoted in Mandal, *Mahapran Jogendranath*, 66.

<sup>153</sup> Quoted in Mandal, *Mahapran Jogendranath*, 100–7.

<sup>154</sup> *Mandal, Banga Bhanga*, 24–25.

<sup>155</sup> Quoted in *Mandal, Banga Bhanga*, 63.

<sup>156</sup> *Jagaran*, 14 December 1946, in Mandal, *Mahapran Jogendranath*, 68–69.

<sup>157</sup> Mandal, *Mahapran Jogendranath*, 111.

<sup>158</sup> Mandal, *Mahapran Jogendranath*, 108.

<sup>159</sup> I borrow this idea from Gyanendra Pandey, 'Partition and Independence in Delhi: 1947–48', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 32:36, 6–12 September 1997, 2264.

<sup>160</sup> For details, see *Bandyopadhyay, Caste, Protest and Identity*, 35–54.

<sup>161</sup> Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, *Atmcharit ba purbasmriti (Autobiography or Old Memories)*, Thakurnagar, Matua Mahasanga, 1994, 87–88.

<sup>162</sup> Interview with Jagadish Chandra Mandal in Calcutta on 6 February 2013.

<sup>163</sup> Manohar Mouli Biswas, *Amar Bhubanae Ami Benche Thaaki (I Survive in My Own World)*, Kolkata, Chaturtha Duniya, 2013, 9, 76, 84.

<sup>164</sup> Haripada Roy, *Sangramer Jiban (A Life of Struggle)*, Kolkata, Joydhak Books, n.d., 11, 38.

<sup>165</sup> Jatin Bala, *Shikor chenra jiban: Udbastu Daliter Dalil* (Uprooted Lives: The Testament of a Dalit Refugee), Calcutta, Gangchil, 2018, 87–96.

<sup>166</sup> Roy, *Sangramer Jiban*, 46, 93.

<sup>167</sup> D.P. Das, *The Untouchable Story*, New Delhi, Allied Publishers, 1985, 9.



## 2 The Great Exodus

### Early Migration

Partition did not solve the problems of the Dalit population in Bengal. Their claim to separate political identity as distinct from the wider Hindu community and their relationship with the Muslims were put to serious test in the immediate post-Partition period. Despite their vehement protestations, all the districts in which the Namasudras lived went to East Bengal.<sup>1</sup> The position of the Rajbansis was more complicated, as their ethnospace was divided by the new international political boundary.<sup>2</sup> But most of them did not—or could not—migrate immediately. In Bengal, the migration of refugees took place in waves, not as a cataclysmic movement of large bodies of the population as in Punjab. The first wave of refugees who came in 1947–48 mainly consisted of the wealthy classes, mostly the upper-caste Hindu gentry and the educated middle classes. Many of them, including some of the Namasudra middle classes as well, were government service holders and they opted for posting in West Bengal. Many others were landowners who could sell or arrange exchanges of properties.<sup>3</sup> According to Prafulla Chakrabarti's calculation, about 1.1 million refugees had come to West Bengal by June 1948, and of them, 81.8 per cent belonged to the urban and rural 'middle classes'.<sup>4</sup> In all probability, they belonged mostly to the three *bhadralok* upper castes, i.e. Brahman, Kayastha, and Baidya. They came, as Udit Sen has recently argued, with significant social and cultural capital, and this facilitated their resettlement in and around the metropolitan area of Calcutta within a short span of time.<sup>5</sup> A significant number of historical and literary writings and visual representations have now told us their stories of displacement, struggles, and subsequent resettlement in great detail.

However, very few Dalit peasants had migrated or could afford to move in 1947–48, simply because they did not have the necessary social and financial capital to undertake that risky move. And the level of violence in East Bengal in the wake of Partition was not severe enough to force them to leave. Bengal



had a fair share of pre-Partition violence in 1946, which we have mentioned in [Chapter 1](#). But unlike Punjab, the region was unusually peaceful following the actual Partition in August 1947.<sup>6</sup> This continued until the riots started in February 1950, and then the Namasudras too began to leave East Bengal in droves. Apart from that, leaders like Jogendranath Mandal and the AISC had advised them to stay back. Mandal himself decided to remain in Pakistan and accepted the position of Chairman of the Pakistan Constituent Assembly, where, in his opening address, M.A. Jinnah assured the citizens of Pakistan: ‘You may belong to any religion or caste or creed—that has nothing to do with the business of the state.’<sup>7</sup> Following him, in a celebratory message on Jinnah’s birthday in December 1947, Khwaja Nazimuddin, the Chief Minister of East Bengal, repeated that solemn pledge: ‘Pakistan is not the state of Muslims alone, it belongs to all peoples and communities who live in it and who are loyal to it.’<sup>8</sup> Mandal and his followers trusted them and thought that the SCs would be better off in Pakistan than in Hindu-dominated India under Congress rule and opted to stay back. Mandal himself went on to join Pakistan’s central cabinet as the Labour and Law Minister.<sup>9</sup>

It appears that Ambedkar had given Mandal his ‘qualified assent’ to stay on in Pakistan and work with the League to safeguard the rights of the SCs.<sup>10</sup> But Ambedkar’s position on the Muslim League was shifting in the early years of independence, and in November 1947 he issued the following appeal to his fellow SCs in Pakistan:

I would like to tell the Scheduled Castes who happen today to be impounded inside Pakistan to come over to India by such means as may be available to them. The second thing I want to say is that it would be fatal for the Scheduled Castes, whether in Pakistan or in Hyderabad, to put their faith in Muslims or the Muslim League. It has become a habit with the Scheduled Castes to look upon the Muslims as their friends simply because they dislike the Hindus. This is a mistaken view.<sup>11</sup>

But his party colleagues in East Bengal disagreed, as Dhananjay Roy, an SC member of the Legislative Assembly, issued a statement on 18 January 1948, clarifying that Ambedkar’s appeal was only meant for the Dalit in West Pakistan, where serious violence had broken out, and not for those who were in the East, where only some ‘minor accidents’ had occurred. So, he implored the Namasudra and other Dalit peasants not to migrate, as no one in the Indian Union would be waiting to welcome them. He also assured his followers that the current government would soon restore peace and order and life would be pleasant again.<sup>12</sup>

However, this confidence disappeared when the riots started in February–March 1950. The Namasudra peasants were already being harassed in the East Bengal countryside. On 19 January, Mandal wrote a letter to the East Bengal Premier, Nurul Amin, giving details of the atrocities being perpetrated on the Namasudras with the complicity of the police in Gopalganj, Pirojpur, and parts of Khulna and Sylhet districts. He also warned the Premier:

I am of the view that if such widespread oppression and persecution is (sic) carried on the Scheduled Caste people irrespective of their fault or guilt, it will only lead to mass exodus of the Scheduled Caste people and the creation of a feeling that they are not entitled to get protection of law in Pakistan.<sup>13</sup>

Then from February, full-scale riots broke out. In April, after the horrific Barisal riots (see the section on The Riots of 1950 for details), Mandal told his followers in an open meeting that he would no longer advise them to stay in Pakistan.<sup>14</sup> Although this position was vehemently opposed by the other leaders of the East Bengal Scheduled Caste Federation,<sup>15</sup> the Namasudra peasants by then had already started to move. In this second wave of migration between 1950 and 1957, about 2.1 million people moved from East Bengal to West Bengal.<sup>16</sup> ‘About 95% of the refugees are Namasudras’, reported a police intelligence report in June 1952.<sup>17</sup> These Dalit migrants arrived in India without much social, cultural, or financial capital. Because of their late arrival, their story has also fallen off our mainstream Partition narratives. But it is very much a part of the long history of Partition, and we are going to tell that story of the great Dalit exodus in this chapter.

## The Riots of 1950

As the situation gradually unfolded, the Partition did not solve the problem of minorities in Bengal, and indeed it created new minorities—the Hindus in East Bengal and Muslims in West Bengal—and their fates remained tangled in a significant way. In East Bengal, the residual existence of Hindus created a sense of incompleteness for the majority community, reflecting their inability to have that unsullied pure Islamic nation. The projected ‘Other’ of the Pakistani nation was the ‘Hindu’—an official category that tended to collapse the differences between all non-Muslims and incorporated the Dalit. As Ghazal Asif has recently argued, from the very beginning of Pakistan, the ‘religious

minorities were increasingly imagined as a collective in binary opposition to the interests of the Muslim majority.’ The political discourse within the CA and outside evolved in such a way that it demonstrated ‘the sheer impossibility of retaining a distinction between Scheduled Castes and caste Hindus.’<sup>18</sup> Therefore, the Namasudras who stayed back in East Bengal soon found that the Pakistani state had unmistakably ascribed to them a ‘Hindu’ *minority* identity. Jogendranath Mandal, who chose to join the Liaquat Ali Khan ministry, remained in that position until 1950. Although initially he was championing the specific SC identity and proposing to work for their empowerment, increasingly he found himself to be representing the larger Hindu minority interests in Pakistan.<sup>19</sup> Some of the Federation leaders continued to hold conferences in East Bengal demanding their rights as SCs and criticising the Congress, thus trying to resist their imposed indistinctiveness sharing a generalised minority identity.<sup>20</sup> But the Dalit peasants on the ground, as the field studies of Beth Roy and Masayuki Usuda reveal, had to live more and more with that generalised Hindu identity.<sup>21</sup> As a Namasudra refugee would later put it after crossing over to India: ‘Our caste did not matter in [East] Pakistan. We were Hindus there.’<sup>22</sup> And therefore, even when they fought for social justice under communist leadership since 1948, the state in Pakistan represented the Namasudra peasant rebels as ‘Hindu’ miscreants.<sup>23</sup> This process of ‘Othering’ not only tended to exclude them from Pakistani nationhood; it helped the corresponding Hindu nationalism in India to try to appropriate them as parts of a wider subcontinental Hindu community, or more specifically, as the oppressed Hindu minority of East Bengal.

But despite this dual ascription process seeking to impose on them a ‘Hindu’ minority identity, there were still significant differences between the SC peasants and the *savarna* Hindus who lived in East Bengal. As Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated in January 1948, the vulnerability of the Muslim minorities in India became explicit. This had repercussions in Pakistan, particularly at a time when Jinnah became incapacitated by illness, his influence on politics began to wane, and that old guarantee of protection for the minorities no longer worked. Under the growing pressure of Islamic nationalism, thousands of *savarna* Hindus began to migrate. According to one report, 1,870,535 Hindu refugees migrated from East Bengal to West Bengal by February 1949.<sup>24</sup> But even at this stage, the Dalit peasants did not feel insecure enough to think of migrating, but the situation was going to change soon.

A recent study has claimed that the official Pakistani policy continued to distinguish between the Dalit who were seen as 'good Hindus' and the other upper caste people treated as 'bad Hindus'. On 19 June 1949, Mandal's 43rd birthday was celebrated by the state with much fanfare in both Karachi and Dacca, apparently to show solidarity with the Dalit community.<sup>25</sup> However, as secret telegrams reveal, from the beginning of 1950, Mandal was under surveillance by the Pakistani Foreign Service on suspicion of being disloyal to the state.<sup>26</sup> On the ground, distinctions within the Hindu community—the nation's 'Other'—were gradually being elided and Dalit peasants too began to feel vulnerable and defenceless.<sup>27</sup> This came to a tipping point in January–February 1950 when at last the Namasudra peasants in large numbers decided to leave Pakistan.

Interestingly, this second wave of post-Partition migration in Bengal was actually triggered by anti-communist counter-insurgency measures taken by the Pakistani security agencies in the wake of a renewal of the Tebhaga movement in 1948. The first one of its kind took place in May 1949 in Nachol in Rajshahi district, where the Santhal peasants were the main supporters of the communists. Brutal police action led to violent Santhal retaliation and more repression. This resulted in the first wave of Santhal migration into the adjacent Murshidabad district, triggering counter-violence on the Muslims in this West Bengal border district.<sup>28</sup> Then on 20 December 1949, another incident occurred in a Namasudra village called Kalshira in Chitalmari Union of Bagerhat subdivision in the district of Khulna. When a police party came to Kalshira in search of a few communists, they were resisted by the villagers and this resulted in the death of one police constable. Two days later, a larger police force, assisted by Ansars and other elements, attacked not just this one but twenty-two other neighbouring villages inhabited by 'Hindu Namasudras'.<sup>29</sup> They began to flee in panic and by 10 February, there were 13,000 refugees at the Sealdah station in Calcutta recapitulating their horror stories of violence, suffering, and privation for an incensed Calcutta press and an irate Hindu public.<sup>30</sup>

However, there are multiple narratives of these incidents. According to a press statement of the Pakistani Prime Minister, the Kalshira incident did not immediately lead to any widespread violence; it was well contained by the timely and effective intervention of the district administration. Nothing happened for about two weeks until on 15 January, the Indian Deputy Prime Minister Vallabhbhai Patel came to Calcutta and gave a

provocative speech reminding the Bengalis of what had happened to them a few years ago in Calcutta and Noakhali. Then from 18 January, the Calcutta Press and the Hindu Mahasabha picked up the Kalshira story and began to publish inciting reports and statements, which led to the outbreak of riots in the border districts of West Bengal, leading to the exodus of Muslim refugees. This, according to him, led to violence against Hindus in East Bengal. In other words, he made Sardar Patel and the aggressive Calcutta press responsible for inciting the riots and considered what happened in East Bengal as purely 'retaliatory'.<sup>31</sup>

The Indian Deputy Prime Minister, of course, rejected this version of the events and also the allegation.<sup>32</sup> If we reconstruct the timeline from other sources, the Kalshira incident was first reported in Calcutta by *Amrita Bazar Patrika* on 30 December 1949. The Deputy Prime Minister, during his Calcutta visit on 15 January 1950, did not mention this incident at all. *The Statesman* on 21 January reported the arrival of the first group of 500 refugees from Khulna. On 25 January, Ashutosh Lahiry, the Chairman of the Parliamentary Board of the Hindu Mahasabha, issued a press statement describing the incident as 'something like a "miniature Noakhali"', affecting the marshy tracts inhabited by the Namasudras. It was, in his opinion, 'carefully planned' and was part of 'a deliberate conspiracy to wipe out the Hindu population' of the region.<sup>33</sup> On 1 February, Lakshmikanta Moitra, the MP from the border district of Nadia, reported the incident to the Indian parliament, noting that retaliatory violence had already started in Murshidabad, and Prime Minister Nehru promised to probe into the situation.<sup>34</sup> The press reports in Calcutta hereafter increasingly became belligerent and inciting.

As the stories of atrocities appeared in the Calcutta press and the exaggerated statements of the Hindu Mahasabha leaders,<sup>35</sup> emotions in West Bengal boiled over and full-scale anti-Muslim riots started on 8 February, after a gap of nearly two years. It affected Muslim majority areas in the north and central Calcutta and soon spread to the industrial areas of Howrah and parts of Hooghly. In Muslim-dominated localities, their lives and properties were targeted. Their houses were set on fire; shops were looted. In Howrah, trains were stopped in search of Muslim passengers, and the violence that was unleashed reminded of what happened in Punjab in 1947–48. The state government quickly deployed the army. This saved lives, but properties were lost, as local security personnel was also reported to be complicit in the mass violence.<sup>36</sup> As the Muslims did not feel safe, they began to flee; by the beginning of 1951, about 700,000 of them

had fled to East Bengal.<sup>37</sup>

However, what was undeniable about the riots of 1950 was the element of retaliation involved in the assaults—the Pakistani Premier was not entirely wrong, after all. As the Bangladeshi literary giant Anisuzzaman recalled, minorities on both sides of the border believed that the violence had been started on the other side because of causes that nobody knew.<sup>38</sup> The outbreak of riots in West Bengal in February—which was in itself provoked by the incidents in Khulna—soon led to even more serious attacks on the Hindu minorities in large parts of East Bengal. Exaggerated news and rumours of Calcutta incidents first led to anti-Hindu riots in Dacca from 10 February, when the Chief Secretaries of two Bengals were still conferring in the city to resolve the crisis. In Dacca, Hindu properties were looted and destroyed, and then Hindu lives were threatened, allegedly by *Mohajirs* or Bihari Muslim refugees, according to government reports. But within two days, the violence spread to other districts, like Rajshahi, Noakhali, Chittagong, Faridpur, Khulna, Sylhet, Mymensingh, and then finally to Barisal. In Mymensingh, at Bhairab Bazaar Bridge, India bound trains were detained and Hindu refugees were singled out and killed—according to some reports, in thousands. The Barisal riot was perhaps the worst of its kind in terms of the ferocity of violence that was unleashed on the Hindus. Fuelled by a rumour that Fazlul Huq, the former premier of Bengal and a popular leader of Barisal, had been killed in Calcutta, angry mobs slaughtered thousands of Hindus. The victims of these riots were not the high-caste *bhadrolok*, as many of them had already left, but the Dalit and tribal peasants like the *Namasudras* and the *Santhals*.<sup>39</sup> Huq rushed back to Barisal at the behest of B.C. Roy<sup>40</sup> and told the people of his native land not to harm the Hindus ‘in the interest of the Muslims in West Bengal’.<sup>41</sup> In such an environment, even Prime Minister Nehru could not help but give an emotive speech in the parliament:

There was arson and looting on a large scale, men were murdered and women ravished. There were also forcible conversions and desecration of places of worship. The residents of those villages could not escape from the scene because of a rigid cordon maintained by the armed police and others. And even news could not come through.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, what started as an anti-communist operation soon became a religiously charged incident—even in the speech of the most secular of all Indian Prime Ministers. To establish the secular credentials of India, he presented comparative figures of casualties, further dehumanising the victims of the riots. As for

migration, it was reported that since the beginning of February, 19,500 Hindus had come to West Bengal, against 5,100 Muslims leaving for the East.<sup>43</sup> Such a comparative presentation of numbers only whetted up an appetite for retribution. Pakistan banned Indian newspapers for their inflammatory reports, but their own media were not above blame. Nehru regretfully noted in one of his letters to provincial Chief Ministers on 1 April 1950: 'Newspapers in Pakistan write hysterically and give a completely one-sided picture. I regret to say that many newspapers in India are equally hysterical and also give a completely one-sided picture.'<sup>44</sup> It was no wonder that exaggerated accounts of Calcutta riots sparked off retaliatory violence in Dacca, and the news of massacres in Barisal led to the second wave of rioting in West Bengal from 1 March, leading to similar violence in the East. This started the mass exodus, the majority of the migrants being Namasudra and Santhal peasants. While official correspondence from Nehru acknowledged that those who were migrating at this stage were 'mostly belonging to the depressed classes',<sup>45</sup> in popular media reports that distinction was rarely made, as all refugees became 'Hindus' fleeing from 'Muslim' atrocities.<sup>46</sup>

This portrayal was forcefully endorsed by the working committee of the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha, which described the victims as the 'Hindu minority of East Bengal'. In its opinion, it was simply 'untrue' that all these Namasudras were communists. It, therefore, demanded 'a planned transfer of population'. It also issued another document with graphic details of atrocities perpetrated in various districts of East Bengal and alleged that the West Bengal government was deliberately suppressing news for fear of reprisals in India. What happened on this side of the border, it forcefully argued, was only 'a mild reaction in Calcutta'.<sup>47</sup>

This Hindu nationalist discourse was further strengthened by the fact that many of those who migrated after the riots of 1950 came with memories of horrific communal violence, which many of them had experienced personally.<sup>48</sup> These memories led to a widely shared sense of betrayal and hatred towards the Muslims—and interestingly, this feeling of antipathy was stronger among the 'lower castes'. In 1954, the Anthropological Department of the GI conducted a survey of 'social tensions' among the refugees in the Jirat rehabilitation camp in Hooghly district. The results showed that the majority of them—61.6 percent of the 'higher caste' and 66.7 percent of the 'lower caste' refugees—were 'hostile' towards Muslims. This sense of hostility was much higher among the women—80 percent of women among the former and



79.1 percent among the latter caste group shared this antipathy. Probably this emanated from a greater sense of insecurity among women, as 78 percent of female as opposed to 32 percent of the male refugees complained of 'heinous attacks' by Muslims on Hindu girls and women, and harassment at the railway stations and border crossings. While this memory of shock and horror explained their attitude of hatred, the survey concluded that the caste differential was due to different levels of education among the two caste groups.<sup>49</sup> But more probably, it was because of another factor. During the recent riots of 1950, the lower castes, particularly the SCs, were the main targets of attack by the Muslims in East Bengal, and hence their sense of bitterness was much more intense than others'.

These attitudes resulted in retaliatory violence against Muslims in the border districts of West Bengal. Some of the worst cases of violence in 1950 took place in the district of Nadia, where the Namasudra migrant peasants, driven out of their villages in Jessore and Khulna in East Bengal, took their revenge on Muslim villagers, driving them off to Pakistan, resulting in an almost virtual exchange of population (more details in [Chapter 3](#), section on Borderlands).<sup>50</sup> This seems to have been in sharp contrast to the situation in Punjab, as described by Urvashi Butalia, where the Dalit could possibly stay away from the Partition violence.<sup>51</sup> It appears in Bengal that the dual ascription process that we described above led to an appropriation of Dalit identity by a more overarching Hindu refugee identity arrayed against its oppositional Other—the Muslims.

[Gandhi has been killed by a bullet, Jinnah is half-dead, the caste Hindus have fled, we the Charals (low castes) have been trapped.]

## **The Delhi Pact and After**

As the refugees began to arrive after 1950, the government in India did not know what to do with them! The Congress government at the centre decided intuitively that these new refugees of the second wave, unlike the earlier arrivals, would be an additional burden on the fledgling economy of India and therefore they were to be sent back at an appropriate time. Nehru wrote to the State Chief Minister Bidhan Chandra Roy: 'It is wrong to encourage any large-scale migration from East Bengal to the west. Indeed, if such a migration takes place, West Bengal and to some extent, the Indian Union will be overwhelmed.'<sup>52</sup> On 2 March 1950, Mohanlal Saxena, the Union Minister for Rehabilitation, came to Calcutta to tell the State government that



the GI would not be providing for rehabilitation for these recent refugees from East Bengal; it could only offer relief.<sup>53</sup> Nehru came to Calcutta a week later but left without announcing any concrete plan to resolve the situation.<sup>54</sup> It is understood that he seriously believed that the fear of violence shared by the minorities was more 'psychological' than real and they would readily return to their homes when their confidence would be restored on both sides of the border. Pallavi Raghavan has recently argued that at this stage he was also dealing with a powerful cry for war raised by some of his colleagues. The Hindu Mahasabha leader Dr Shyama Prasad Mukherji, the Bengal Chief Minister B.C. Roy and Deputy Prime Minister Vallabhbhai Patel were talking in terms of an 'outright solution', which would mean an exchange of the minority population or a war to seize territory from Pakistan to rehabilitate the refugees. To thwart this rather powerful pressure for war as a response to the crisis of migration, Raghavan argues, Nehru negotiated the Delhi Pact.<sup>55</sup>

On 8 April 1950, Nehru signed the Delhi Pact on Minorities with the Pakistani Premier Liaquat Ali Khan. Jingoistic rhetoric notwithstanding, whether anyone really had an appetite for war is difficult to ascertain. So, the major purpose of the pact appears to have been to restore communal peace to stem the tide of migration and ensure the safe return of the refugees. In more concrete terms, it involved a few confidence-building measures to assure the minorities, such as the appointment of Minorities Ministers in both countries, the constitution of Minority Commissions, investigation of the recent violent incidents to prevent their future recurrence, restoration of abducted women, and finally, encouragement of reverse migration and safeguarding the properties of the returning refugees. Immediately after the signing of the pact, some positive measures were taken, communal violence stopped, the rate of migration slowed down, and there was also some reverse migration.<sup>56</sup> The Hindus who went back were 'predominantly agriculturists or poorer urban classes'; none of them were upper-caste = middle-class *bhadralok*.<sup>57</sup> According to official records, between 12 April and 27 August, i.e. in the first five months after the signing of the pact, 695,166 people left West Bengal by train, but this number could include some Muslims as well. On the other hand, almost double that number, 1,155,776, entered West Bengal from the other side; once again, it included some Muslim returnees.<sup>58</sup> There were possibly some more who crossed the border on foot, and no one knew their numbers. In other words, the numbers were so unreliable that it was difficult to say how many Hindus

went back and how many Muslims returned to West Bengal. But although exact numbers are unavailable, all indications suggest that the inflow of people into West Bengal was much higher than the outflow.

Anecdotally, there was a report from Nadia indicating that many low-caste refugees from Dhubulia camp went back to their ancestral homes in Barisal, because they had lost children and old members of their families due to diseases and lack of medical facilities in the refugee camps. On the other hand, they had heard from reliable sources that the situation had improved in Pakistan.<sup>59</sup> In contrast, we also have the story of Kalimohan Burman, a Rajbansi peasant from Rangpur, who went back to his ancestral home, but again felt the pressure from local Muslims and Ansars and returned to India a second time, leaving his properties in Pakistan.<sup>60</sup> And this was not an isolated or unique incident, as many Hindus who returned after the Delhi Pact found their properties already taken over by the local Muslims.<sup>61</sup>

On the Indian side, the Namasudra peasants who had taken possession of Muslim properties in Nadia felt extremely uncomfortable when some of the local Muslims started coming back after the Delhi Pact. According to one report, 32,000 Muslims who had left India before 31 March 1951 came back, and of them, 27,000 belonged to Nadia.<sup>62</sup> A police report, therefore, noted ‘great commotion among the refugees’, who were unwilling to accommodate the returnees, and police arrangements had to be made to avoid the possibilities of clashes.<sup>63</sup> In this context, on 13 March 1952, Hemanta Basu asked in the Legislative Assembly the most pertinent question—‘In Malda 20 thousand refugees were accommodated in Muslim houses. Now many of those Muslims have come back. Now where will these refugees go?’ The government had no convincing answer.<sup>64</sup>

The refugees were extremely upset when Haripada Chatterjee, a Congress MLA, began to have meetings in the border regions of Nadia urging Muslims to come back and take possession of their properties.<sup>65</sup> Emboldened by such encouragement and bolstered up by support from co-religionists from neighbouring districts, the local Muslims also began to make organised efforts to reclaim their land and cattle, and this actually led to a few incidents in village Dogachi in Karimpur police station in Nadia.<sup>66</sup> Against this backdrop of mounting tension, the Refugee Eviction Bill was passed in the West Bengal Assembly on 4 April 1951, protecting the sanctity of private property and the state assuming the responsibility of evicting refugees unlawfully occupying private land.<sup>67</sup> This made the Namasudra refugees so edgy that a

minister, Bhupati Majumdar, had to rush to Karimpur within a week to assure them that they would not be evicted from the houses and lands of the Muslims if they had already occupied them.<sup>68</sup>

It was this anticipation of reverse migration, which made the Delhi Pact intensely unpopular in West Bengal, as no one expected the Hindu refugees to willingly go back. Also, properties left by fleeing Muslims had already been occupied by local Hindus, and they were in no mood to vacate them.<sup>69</sup> The political opposition to the Pact was spearheaded by Dr Shyama Prasad Mukherji, who resigned from the Nehru cabinet, where he was the Minister of Industry and Supply. His party colleague K.C. Neogy, who was the Minister of Commerce, also followed him. On 19 April, Mukherji gave a statement in the parliament explaining his position. At the time of Partition, when he was mobilising public opinion in favour of the division of Bengal, he had given a solemn pledge to the Hindus of East Bengal that if in the future their lives and properties were endangered in Pakistan, the Indian state would stand by them. Now, the Indian government, he argued, by taking a soft position on communal violence in Pakistan was reneging on that promise and therefore he could not be a part of this government anymore.<sup>70</sup> Renuka Ray, who was then a Congress Member of Parliament (MP) and later became the State Rehabilitation Minister, tells us that she too, along with some other Congress MPs from West Bengal, felt uncomfortable about the Pact and used the 'conscience clause' to abstain from voting for it.<sup>71</sup> Mukherji came back to Calcutta and organised a campaign against the Pact,<sup>72</sup> allegedly with the blessings of Chief Minister Dr Roy, who also shared his misgivings about the Pact.<sup>73</sup>

Nehru had made a serious miscalculation by expecting that the migration could be stopped and reversed, and he could persuade the refugees to go back. On 23 April 1950, the Governor of West Bengal visited Dhubulia and Ranaghat refugee camps in Nadia district and advised the refugees to leave their families in the camps and go to their original villages in Pakistan to see if the conditions prevailing there had improved after the signing of the Delhi Pact. He asked them to test the truth and veracity of the reports of goodwill of the Pakistani state. But most of the refugees refused to return, and Shyama Prasad Mukherji and Lakshmi Kanta Maitra, who were also visiting the camps on the same day, told the refugees to settle down in India in peace, and forget the painful memories of the past.<sup>74</sup> As a result, not only did most of the refugees refuse to return, and some of those who returned came back, but a fresh influx continued even when communal

violence stopped.

When it turned out that migration was not going to stop and the majority of the migrants were Dalit, the Mahasabha's sympathies for the Hindus of East Bengal began to wane. This became apparent from a statement their President N.C. Chatterjee made in the parliament on 31 March 1955. He reminded Prime Minister Nehru in a rather alarmist tone: 'You know in the districts of Khulna, Barisal and Jessore in one compact block, there are 14 lakhs of Namasudras. They have started to move. It is a terrific thing ... That is something, which must be stopped in India's interests.'<sup>75</sup> This did not sound like standing by the beleaguered Hindu minorities of East Bengal—it virtually amounted to abandoning them, as they belonged to a lower peasant caste!<sup>76</sup> Nehru was all too willing to oblige. In 1956, the process of issuing migration certificates was made more difficult, and in 1957, the borders were sealed, stopping these hapless Dalit peasants from crossing over to India. We will get back to that story in a while.

The post-1950 migration started with a steady trickle—about 25 to 30 a day—but began to rise dramatically from July. In July, August, and September, on an average more than 6,500 refugees were arriving every month, rising to more than 10,000 in October and continuing thereafter at that pace. It rose further in 1955, when on an average more than 17,000 people were arriving every month, rising to its peak of more than 25,000 per month in the first half of 1956.<sup>77</sup> According to official statistics, nearly 2.1 million refugees arrived in West Bengal between 1950 and 1956.<sup>78</sup> But we need to acknowledge that these official figures are not reliable, as: 'Different reports quote different figures'.<sup>79</sup> On the other hand, anecdotal evidence suggests that there were probably many more who just crossed the border and settled down in various places in the border districts of Murshidabad, Nadia, and 24-Parganas; no one knew their exact number.<sup>80</sup> In October 1951, in the Basirhat subdivision of the district of 24-Parganas, according to one report, daily about 200 people were entering from across the border on foot or by boat.<sup>81</sup> The Rajbansis who crossed the border in north Bengal settled down in the districts of Malda, Dinajpur, and Cooch Behar. In their case it is even more difficult to get any exact number.<sup>82</sup> We only have evidence of how a phenomenal rise in the proportion of SC population changed the caste demographics of the border districts throughout the decade of 1951–61.<sup>83</sup> Unlike Punjab, the migration from East Pakistan after 1950 was 'continuous and unpredictable'—'like the tides that rise and fall'—and this

uncertainty made any prior planning to handle the situation 'almost impossible'.<sup>84</sup>

In West Bengal's public space at this juncture the rhetoric of the victimhood of the 'Hindu refugees' seemed to have silenced all other discourses of identity. But the archives indicate that these migrants were a much more heterogeneous group. They were mostly cultivators or day-labourers, or belonged to various professions, like washermen, fishermen, weavers, petty businessmen, and small jotdars and talukdars.<sup>85</sup> And as we have already mentioned, they were mostly Namasudras, but also included some other Dalit castes, like Paundras. They came from all parts of East Bengal, but mostly from Barisal, Faridpur, Jessore, and Khulna, where the Namasudra peasants had been living in close proximity to their Muslim neighbours for a long historical period. So, the question is, why were they migrating even when the rioting had stopped?

Of all the Dalit refugees who arrived in West Bengal in 1950, the most well-known was Jogendranath Mandal. Initially after the signing of the Delhi Pact he toured East Bengal and tried to assuage the fear of the Namasudra peasants. But when the attacks on them did not stop, he finally decided, at great personal risk, to quit his ministerial position in the Pakistani central cabinet as a mark of protest against the continuing repression of Hindu minorities in East Bengal.<sup>86</sup> He migrated to West Bengal and after reaching India, on 8 October 1950, he sent his letter of resignation to Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan.<sup>87</sup> In a subsequent press statement issued on 29 October, he claimed that the Pakistani government had not done enough to implement the provisions of the Delhi Pact, and the situation in East Bengal was not safe enough for the Hindus to live there or for the refugees to go back.<sup>88</sup>

Mandal's 8,000 words long letter of resignation<sup>89</sup> can be read in many ways. In our view, it represented the dilemmas and frustrations of Dalit politics in post-Partition East Bengal and explains the reasons for their migration.<sup>90</sup> In the opening sentence of his letter he acknowledged with sadness 'the failure of ... [his] lifelong mission to uplift the backward Hindu masses of East Bengal'. He also admitted the failure of the AISC strategy of collaborating with the Muslim League on the assumption that the interests of the Muslims in Bengal were 'generally identical with those of the Scheduled Castes'. He trusted Qaid-e-Azam and believed in his 'solemn assurance of equal treatment' in future Pakistan; but he 'always considered the demand of Pakistan by the Muslim League as a bargaining counter'. He felt betrayed

when after Jinnah's death the SCs were denied 'a fair deal in any matter' in Pakistan. He also bitterly complained about the East Bengal government's 'anti-Hindu policy', which equally victimised the Namasudras and other minorities. The construction of the nation's 'Other' thus tended to collapse in the eyes of the state the internal social boundaries within the projected 'Hindu' minority. Mandal, once condemned as the 'enemy of Hindus and Hinduism', wrote the final justification for his resignation in the following words:

When I am convinced that my continuance in office in the Pakistan Central Government is not of any help to Hindus I should not with a clear conscience, create the false impression in the minds of the Hindus of Pakistan and peoples abroad that Hindus can live there with honour and with a sense of security in respect of their life, property and religion. This is about Hindus.<sup>91</sup>

Thus, when Mandal left Pakistan, he was clearly representing two overlapping identities—the feeling of distinctiveness of his Dalit selfhood was not in contradiction with his location within a broader Hindu social and political space vis-a-vis the Muslims. This duality of identity and social consciousness, and their sense of frustration and insecurity in Pakistan represented the mindscape of the Dalit migrants after 1950.

It was not surprising that Mandal's letter was positively received by the Hindu nationalists, as it served their agenda so well.<sup>92</sup> A letter to the editor in *Amrita Bazar Patrika* pointed out:

Mr. Mandal's statement would produce three effects. In the first place, the meaning and impact of Pakistan's Islamic Policy will be clearer than ever to the world at large. Next, it will go far to vindicate Dr. S.P. Mukherjee's stand that the Delhi Pact has hopelessly failed as far as Pakistan is concerned. Last of all, it will serve as a definite eye opener to Pandit Nehru who still seems to have a great faith in Mr. Liaquat Ali Khan's sincerity.<sup>93</sup>

But the Delhi Pact possibly never had a chance of success. Because, Nehru's basic assumption—that migration would stop if overt communal violence could somehow be contained—was wrong. Why would then the Hindus be leaving East Bengal in such large numbers when the riots had already stopped? He was further confused when he found that the majority of the migrants were not just any 'Hindu', but SCs. This state of confusion was quite apparent in a statement he made in the parliament on 25 March 1955:

it appears that what are called scheduled castes or Namasudras are

coming over in considerable number. Why they should be coming in such large numbers is difficult for us to say . ... Deteriorating economic condition, feeling of insecurity for the future and other causes must have been operating there for the last few years.<sup>94</sup>

Thus, baffled and overwhelmed by continuing exodus, he began to explore the idea of economic migration. The Police Intelligence Officers in West Bengal at this stage started questioning those who arrived at Sealdah or at Bongaon and Banpur railway stations. The stories they narrated were interesting and varied, and do not allow us to reconstruct a simple narrative of communal or caste conflict in rural East Bengal which Nehru had initially assumed to be the primary reason behind this recent migration. Nor would these stories fully support the subsequent official narrative of economic migration.

Without going into the details, we may summarise first how the Indian authorities understood the main reasons behind the mass Dalit peasant exodus after the Delhi Pact.<sup>95</sup> First of all, what the refugees reported and the interrogating police officers interpreted in their summaries was the fact that they were fleeing from extraordinary economic hardships in East Bengal caused by the consequences of Partition and influx of thousands of Muhajir refugees from India, resulting in pressures on land in a perennially labour surplus region. A Police Intelligence report emphasised in July 1952 that most of the refugees 'reported the acute economic depression' to be 'the main cause of their migration'.<sup>96</sup> It was particularly visible in the district of Khulna where, according to another report, 'a near famine condition' prevailed. The report mentions 'abnormal low price of jute, less production of paddy and high prices of other essential commodities . ...'<sup>97</sup>

This situation, one needs to remember, was the unfortunate consequence of Partition. Although the food situation in East Bengal had somewhat improved by January 1950, the deteriorating Indo-Pakistani relationship created an economic crisis of unprecedented proportions. The Pakistani authorities refused to release 500,000 bales of raw jute purchased by Indian firms before the recent devaluation, and consequently the Indian government refused to further buy jute from them. Jute was East Bengal's only cash crop, and this ban led to a crash in its jute economy. In further retaliation, India stopped coal supply to East Bengal, and there was an unofficial but virtual ban on movement of all goods by trains and steamers across the border. The result of these Indian sanctions was a major breakdown of the economy of East Bengal with acute shortages of goods.<sup>98</sup> It was not



surprising that the refugees complained of non-availability of daily essentials like cloth and the breakdown of the rationing system and so on.<sup>99</sup>

There were other factors too that added to the economic hardship. The Namasudra day labourers found it difficult to get employment, as their previous employers—the caste Hindu landlords—had mostly left. And in a labour surplus market the Muslim landlords preferred their co-religionists.<sup>100</sup> There is also one report from Barisal mentioning a call for economic boycott of Hindus being preached in mosques and open meetings. It was to encourage them to leave, whereupon their properties could be seized. There were demands for hefty subscriptions for the Jinnah Fund and refusal to pay would lead to various forms of harassment. Refugees also reported Muslim landlords unlawfully seizing Hindu properties and taunting them to leave.<sup>101</sup>

These economic pressures for migration were further buttressed by some non-economic and political developments. The Pakistan government proposed to introduce passports from October 1952. And following the announcement there was deployment of armed forces along the India border. Although Pakistan later postponed it, India decided to go ahead with the introduction of passport. Many Hindus thought that this would close off all opportunities for moving to India in future.<sup>102</sup> This was also the period that witnessed the beginning of Bengali linguistic nationalism that tended to rupture the fabric of official Islamic nationhood, championed by the Pakistani state, and the Hindu minority was blamed for it. This led to further tension among the Hindus and the panic was systematically fanned by interested groups with an eye on the properties.<sup>103</sup>

To complement these pressures, there were rumours circulating that the GI was waiting to offer them a lucrative rehabilitation package, including offers of land, if they once managed to cross the border.<sup>104</sup> There was even speculation that ‘the Hindus now leaving from that area are mostly of the poorer classes who are attracted by the thought of free meals and doles in West Bengal refugee camps for a period, after which they plan to return.’<sup>105</sup> As we shall see in the section ‘Contest for Space’, that was never the case. While the government Intelligence community tried to construct a narrative of economic migration, there was enough evidence in their own records that suggested that the decision of the Namasudra peasants to leave their land and home was not just because of these economic pressures or alleged incentives. It was no ordinary economic migration as the GI wanted to present it.<sup>106</sup> Nor was there any communal pogrom to force this migration. The

fundamental reason behind it was deeply psychological, though not in the same way as Nehru understood it. These peasants finally severed their emotional ties with the land and moved because of an overwhelming sense of insecurity that cannot be simply explained either by communal violence or by economic distress. It was created by what we describe below as a pervasive state of *post-Partition conjunctural* violence.

## Contest for Space

The Indian state from the very beginning was ambiguous about an official definition for the people uprooted by Partition. Instead of 'refugee', it preferred the terms 'Displaced Person' and 'migrant'. The Government of West Bengal defined a 'Displaced Person' as someone who migrated from East to West Bengal between 1 October 1946 and 31 December 1950 due to civil strife or because of the creation of the two dominions of India and Pakistan. This person was expected not to have any property in West Bengal and should be willing to stay permanently in India.<sup>107</sup> This official definition and the initial cut-off date of December 1950 raise a few important conceptual questions—could these people migrating to India after 1950 be considered as legitimate Partition refugees? Should we include them in Partition history? Or were they just economic migrants? And if that was the case, could they possibly claim any rehabilitation package from the host state?

According to received wisdom, a 'refugee is not pulled out, he is pushed out. Given the choice he would stay.'<sup>108</sup> This meant, if there was any option available, a refugee would never consider leaving her/his homeland. This raises another conceptual question: what would be considered as legitimate push factor/s for any migration to be called forced migration? Although India never signed the UN Convention of 1951, according to that protocol the 'fear of persecution' was the only litmus test for assessing any forced mass migration. And this persecution would mean 'a threat to life or freedom on account of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership of a particular social group'.<sup>109</sup> For West Bengal, Chief Minister B.C. Roy on 25 January 1950 defined this threat more specifically as a 'major communal disturbance'.<sup>110</sup> The riots of 1950 had not quite started when he said that, and by this definition the migrants who came after the cessation of violence following the signing of the Delhi Pact in April 1950 would not qualify for refugee status. This possibly was the reason why the GI was initially reluctant to

provide any permanent rehabilitation for these most recent arrivals from Pakistan.

But this definition followed by the Indian state was soon found to be too narrow, as people would often feel compelled to leave their homes for a variety of reasons. There exists a 'minimal social bond', writes Andrew Shacknove, between the citizen and the state, by which the latter guarantees 'physical security, vital subsistence, and liberty of political participation and physical movement'. Any severance of that bond can be a legitimate reason for migration and entitlement to refugee status.<sup>111</sup> By this definition, the Dalit peasants fleeing East Pakistan throughout the 1950s—i.e. even after the cessation of communal violence after the signing of the Delhi Pact in April 1950—certainly deserved to be considered as refugees. They did not migrate because of economic reasons or incentives, which were only secondary reasons. Peasants are far too emotionally tied to the land and do not easily sever those ties for the sake of economic mobility. In this case, they decided to leave their home and land out of an overwhelming sense of insecurity.

The two peasant communities of East Bengal—the Muslims and the Namasudras—were living in close proximity for generations, living side by side, colonizing the marshy tracts and forestlands, often uniting against high caste zamindars and sometimes also fighting fierce battles with each other over land and community honour. Dipesh Chakrabarty has defined 'proximity' as a mode of 'relating to difference in which (historical and contingent) difference is neither reified nor erased but negotiated'. This social process of negotiation breaks down only under pressure of another powerful political process meant to 'create absolute others'.<sup>112</sup> We now have enough evidence, which we will present below, that indicates that this process of negotiation was being exponentially disrupted, though not abruptly interrupted, in rural East Pakistan in the wake of Partition. We have already mentioned the 'othering' process of Islamic nationalism and the appropriation process of Hindu political mobilisation immediately before and after Partition. In the 1950s the serious economic crisis in East Bengal resulting from Indian economic boycott imposed further stress on community relations, as the Hindus—the 'proxy citizens' of India<sup>113</sup>—found themselves at the receiving end of much of the blame for public miseries. Jogendranath Mandal bitterly complained to the Indian Deputy High Commissioner in Karachi that the Hindus faced hostilities in East Bengal because of 'India's strangulation of East Pakistan', and this was the main reason why they were migrating.<sup>114</sup> And then the

influx of thousands of Muhajir refugees from India added a further extraneous factor to set in motion a brutal contest for space.

By May 1950, according to Pakistani official figures, the number of Muhajir refugees in the province exceeded 986,000, of whom only 120,000 could be accommodated in refugee camps. As British Deputy High Commissioner's weekly report from Dacca indicated: 'Permanent rehabilitation on any large scale is proving an administrative impossibility.'<sup>115</sup> This contingency demanded a different strategy of demographic management. With reference to movements of refugees in Delhi and Karachi in 1947–48, Vazira Zamindar noted: 'there were two distinct sets of refugees, Hindu and Sikh refugees on the one hand and Muslim refugees on the other, and the rehabilitation of one required the exodus of the other.'<sup>116</sup> And that explained to a large extent the violence that occurred. By way of explaining the mass migration in post-Partition Punjab, Ravinder Kaur also observed: 'A perverse logic that guided these forced migrations was that room had to be made for the incoming refugees from the other side. So, more refugees were created on both sides to make way for more refugees.'<sup>117</sup> This was exactly the reason that produced persistent low-intensity violence in East Bengal in the build up to the riots of 1950.<sup>118</sup> This form of violence continued and even increased manifold after the riots stopped. And the main targets of this violence were the Dalit peasants, for even after the great exodus of 1950, there was a sizeable Dalit population left in East Bengal—constituting 71.2 per cent of its Hindu population, according to the Pakistan Census of 1951.<sup>119</sup> The social space for them to negotiate difference therefore shrank, because of a fierce contest for physical space and a severe resource crunch that resulted from the long-term aftermath of Partition.

In recognition of this situation the Government of West Bengal extended the cut-off date for migration to 31 December 1954, and promised to cover people who migrated not just because of civil strife but also because of a fear of it.<sup>120</sup> We suggest however that the situation continued well beyond 1954, and it was unfair on the part of the Indian state not to recognise that fact when it sealed off the border in 1957, stopping these beleaguered Dalit peasants from migrating to India. We may try to illustrate this situation of low-intensity violence by using some refugee testimonies from the archives. We will begin with the story of an individual and then move to a more generalised narrative of collective sense of insecurity. Our starting point is the story of the murder of Banku Shikari.

## Murder of Banku Shikari and Collective Anxiety

On 10 June 1952, the Deputy Secretary, Government of West Bengal, wrote the following letter to his counterpart in East Bengal:

I am directed to state that a report has been received by this Government that towards the close of April 1952 *a gang of miscreants belonging to the majority community* equipped with fire arms broke open the main gate of Shri Banku Shikari's house at dead of night, *shot dead* Shri Shikari and his wife, *raped* their daughter Tara Shikari aged 15 who was also fired at after the rape was committed and *decamped with a huge amount of booty* the exact value of which could not be ascertained owing to the murder of Shri Shikari and his wife. Shri Sivendra Shikari and Mandra Shikari, nephews of Bankim Shikari and Shri Shashi Mondol and several other co-villagers who rushed to the help of Banku Shikari received serious gun shot injuries and were removed to the Bagerhat hospital.

The *inhuman brutalities* committed on the members of this family belonging to the *minority community* in East Bengal have, it is reported, *seriously affected the morale of the Hindus not only of this particular village but also of the six neighbouring villages as well, because this family was the richest and the most influential among the minorities in this area. In consequence the Hindus of this area are preparing to migrate to India to save the lives and properties and the honour of their womenfolk.*

I am accordingly to request that ... the Government of East Bengal may be moved to enquire into the matter and take effective steps to bring the culprits to book and create conditions for the members of the minority community as *would enable them to regain their confidence and live in their homes in peace honour and security.*<sup>121</sup> [Italics added]

This letter was based on information provided by other Namasudra refugees who arrived from Khulna shortly after the incident. A brief look at their testimonies as recorded by Police Intelligence officers would reveal further interesting details about the importance of Shikari's murder for the collective psyche of the local Namasudra community.<sup>122</sup> We may start with Madhab Mandal of Baysingha, in Moralganj police station in Khulna district, who reported that not one but two armed robberies were committed in the same night in the houses of Banku Shikari and his nephew Jogendra Shikari. The miscreants who were unknown Muslims and were armed with firearms, killed Banku, his wife and looted away cash and other goods valued at about Rs. 16,000/17,000. They seriously injured Jogendra and decamped with cash valued at about Rs. 10,000. The local police, he reported, took up the investigation of the case and arrested one Mogbul Haoladar of Lakhshmi Khali, a commander of the local Ansar Party, and two other unknown people. This story was

corroborated by Saral Kumar Mandal of Nilgiri Halderghi village, Dharani Mallick of Bel-Kata, in Rampal police station of Khulna, and a few others who arrived at the same day. A slightly different story was given by Haribar Maulangi who reported a robbery in the house of Banku Shikari on the night of 25 April 1952. The miscreants, who were unknown Muslims, killed the owner, his wife, and a teacher who resided in the house by gunshot and injured seven others, and decamped with cash and ornaments valued above Rs. 16,000. Surjya Kumar Howladar also mentioned a robbery committed by unknown Muslims who decamped with things to the value of Rs. 550 only. He further mentioned that when they went to the police station, they were allowed to lodge only a First Information Report for a theft case and were not permitted to mention robbery or any names.

Significant additional information was provided by Kalipada Bairagi who mentioned that the armed robbers were obstructed and chased away by the male members of Banku Shikari's household and there was a clash, resulting in the death of one of the intruders, who was hit by a spear by Nagen Shikari, Banku's nephew. The miscreants before escaping separated the head of their dead colleague and took it away to avoid identification. Kalipada claimed to have been closely related to Banku Shikari and to have gone to Banku's house, a double-storied building, that same night. He also claimed to have seen the dead bodies and thought that it was a robbery gone horribly wrong. Possibly Banku had recognised some of the miscreants and that was the reason why he was killed. The same story was also corroborated by Nityananda Mandal, who was closely related to the family of Banku Shikari.

From the letter and the testimonies above, we can build a profile of Banku Shikari and try to understand his position within the local community relations in the villages of Khulna. He was a rich Namasudra peasant who owned a two-storied house where he used to keep a substantial amount of cash, not unusual for a landholding rich peasant in East Bengal. He was respected as a leader of the Namasudra community, but in official discourse in India, he was identified as a 'Hindu' and a 'minority', indicating the ascription process that we mentioned earlier. His power emanated from the leadership of the local Namasudra community. He was looked up to as he could put up a brave fight, only to be overpowered and out-gunned by the superior power of the majority community. The miscreants are invariably identified as Muslims or Ansars, very clearly indicating the breakdown of the Dalit-Muslim relations in the villages of Khulna. Women were the

worst victims of violence—as in other incidents of Partition violence, they were raped and killed to trample the honour of a rival community. There is also a common allegation of the complicity of the state apparatus, as there was no effective police intervention to provide protection to this family belonging to the minority community.

But how would this one incident instigate a mass exodus from six villages nearby? That becomes clear from the testimony of Sakhi Charan Mandal who had also visited Banku Shikari's house after the incident. Sakhi Charan stated—as recorded and translated by a police officer—that Banku was the richest and most influential man of the locality and was the target (sic) of confidence of all the “Namasudras” of the neighbouring villages. This particular incident caused extreme panic amongst the Hindus and all “Namasudras” of six neighbouring villages are preparing to migrate to India as earlier (sic) as possible.<sup>123</sup> In other words, if the leader of the community, who had control over considerable amount of resources, was not safe in his own house, how could others feel secure?

The Banku Shikari incident was however not an exceptional episode, though certainly an extreme one. Various features of this narrative of individual victimhood represented a common pattern of incitement and harassment experienced by the rest of the community as well. It will become clear if we posit below a few other sample refugee testimonies recorded in IB files.<sup>124</sup>

- 1) Radha Charan Kaibarta of Barisal reported that one Gaizaddi of his village along with others slaughtered a cow in front of his house with a view to wound the religious feelings of the Hindus.
- 2) Raghunath Mandal of Khulna reported a robbery; the miscreants decamped with cash and ornaments valued at Rs. 800.
- 3) Nagendra Nath Biswas of Barisal stated that a robbery was committed in his house. The miscreants assaulted him and his wife and decamped with cash of Rs. 50 and ornaments valued at about Rs. 100.
- 4) Bipin Bala of Barisal reported a robbery in a neighbour's house in his village. Police made an investigation, but no one was arrested.



- 5) Girish Chandra Das of Noakhali reported a robbery in a neighbouring village about 3 miles away.
- 6) Sahadeb Pal of Khulna reported a robbery in a neighbouring village.
- 7) Dhiren Mandal of Khulna reported a robbery in a village about a mile away.
- 8) Pravas Chandra Das of Barisal reported a robbery in his house, which compelled him and his wife to flee for life. When they came back, they found that the robbers had taken away ornaments valued at Rs. 200 and utensils valued at Rs. 60.

If these were reports of armed robberies and petty crimes from Namasudra refugees from the Khulna–Barisal region, there were also similar reports of Muslim attacks on property, petty crimes, provocation, and hostile attitudes of the local police from Rajbansi refugees migrating from north Bengal districts of Rangpur and Dinajpur.<sup>125</sup> And a common complaint shared by all these refugees was about the inaction, if not outright complicity, of the local police and the law enforcing apparatus in general in East Bengal.<sup>126</sup> This inaction gave the predators a sense of impunity; they could now go on perpetrating a culture of violence and intimidation, and get away with it if they chose the right target.

The other common complaint was about the mistreatment of women, which was a common pattern in Partition violence in India. There were many complaints, for example, like the one made by Radha Charan Halder of Barisal who reported that in the absence of Hari Kishor Halder, an unknown Muslim entered his house by cutting a hole in the wall (*sindh*) at the dead of night. Hari Kishore's wife, who was twenty-two years old, was alone in the house. She got scared and was going to shout for help when the miscreant silenced her at the point of a dagger, committed rape on her, and went away. At the time of the retreat, he took away some clothes as well. Another report mentioned the widowed daughter (seventeen years old) of Ramdas Mandal of Bali Khali being raped by Muslims. Kanai Lal Dutta of Barisal reported that on the afternoon of 3 April 1952, one Hedul Sikdar of his village came to his house when he was away and proposed to his wife Chapala, aged about nineteen years, to come out of the

house and to marry him, but she did not agree. She reported the matter to her husband on his return, but he did not tell anybody to avoid scandal. To safeguard his family honour and to look for security, he left his native village once he could get some money.<sup>127</sup> There were acts of resistance as well. Nani Gopal Saha of Lalpur, Rajshahi, reported that on the night of 25–26 September 1951, some Muslim refugees staying in Lalpur kidnapped two girls from a Hindu house. The Hindu headman of the village with the help of some Namasudras rescued the girls and a free fight ensued in which a few Muslims were injured.<sup>128</sup>

The family surnames in the sample complaints mentioned above indicate that the Muslim predators made no distinction of caste when they harassed Hindu women. We also have refugee testimonies, which suggest that women of the higher castes like the Brahmans and the Kayasthas faced more of such verbal and physical assault than the SC women.<sup>129</sup> But families belonging to higher castes were probably less keen to report such abuses because of social stigma attached to it. The Indian police reports emphasised that the Namasudra peasant refugees reported such cases of abuse of women more than any other group. Several reports noted that such complaints were more common among refugees coming from Jessore, Khulna, Faridpur, and Barisal, entering India through Benapole–Bongaon check-posts, as compared to others coming through Darshana–Banpur check-posts from districts like Dacca, Mymensingh, Tripura, Noakhali, Chittagong, and the north Bengal districts. The police could not find any convincing explanation for this regional variation except the fact that people coming from the first group of districts were Namasudras who were socially closer to the Muslims as compared to people coming from other districts. In other words, social proximity between the two communities, the police reports suggested, made it easier for the predators to cross the line.<sup>130</sup> If there was any truth in this police observation, then it clearly suggested that by now very little space was left for negotiating the difference between the two communities. When a friend appears to be a potential predator, it signifies the ultimate crisis of trust.

## Typology of Violence

‘For peasants land is like mother, they cannot think of abandoning it’, Jatin Bala, a Dalit refugee writes in his autobiography. But they too ultimately decided to uproot themselves from their land because of a profound sense of confusion, insecurity and

mistrust.<sup>131</sup> This was caused by the low intensity violence that we have described above. It has been characterised by psychoanalyst Jayanti Basu as ‘soft violence’—it was ‘relentless, insidious and disorienting. They could no longer tell with confidence whether old friends had now become new foes.’ It was during such a time of confusion, when the familiar world was turning upside down,<sup>132</sup> the Dalit peasants of East Bengal finally took the decision to migrate.

Haimanti Roy has called this situation ‘routine violence’, which was ‘daily, small-scale, and often transmuted through psychological threats, both verbal and written’.<sup>133</sup> We submit that in real terms this low intensity violence had not yet been routinised in everyone’s quotidian lives in post-Partition rural East Bengal. Oral history evidence and other police intelligence records indicate that the process of negotiating difference was gradually deteriorating but did not completely collapse as yet. There was still a residual space where we could see remnants of the past neighbourly goodwill. Even during the days of the fierce Barisal riot of 1950 there were instances of loving Muslim families and kind *maulvis* giving shelter to their vulnerable Hindu Dalit neighbours at great personal risks.<sup>134</sup> The refugee testimonies recorded in Intelligence Branch (IB) files make it clear that some of them were only reporting rumours or hearsay knowledge, as they were not directly affected by the incidents, which did not even take place in their immediate vicinity. This indicates that while day-to-day abuse was still not everybody’s personal experience in rural East Bengal, the panic and fear circulated through carefully orchestrated rumours pushed the Namasudra peasants on to the path to India, as Jatin Bala’s autobiography mentioned above clearly tells us. Everyday, he recollects, news poured in of robbery, murder, dishonouring of women, and most importantly, of ‘Bihari Muslims’ congregating to attack Hindu villages.<sup>135</sup> The fingers of blame were thus often directed at the migrant Muhajir, rather than to the immediate Muslim neighbours, among whom there was still a Tofajel Chacha, as Bala recalls, who did not want riots.<sup>136</sup> About ten years later when fresh riots again broke out in 1964, the Muhajirs, rather than the Bengali Muslim neighbours, were mainly blamed for the violence.<sup>137</sup>

The ambiguity of the situation was best captured in the novel *Ujantali Upakatha* (the tales of Ujantali) written by the Dalit author Kapil Krishna Thakur. In the last chapter of the novel, we read the conversation between a Namasudra village elder Bidhu Mandal and a Muslim small trader Abdul Gharami, both standing

at the steamer jetty, observing and lamenting about the mass exodus of Hindus. Then they meet Ananta and his son Kajal. The son is about to board the steamer on his way to India, while his father has decided to stay back to look after his ancestral property. The justification for Kajal's decision can be found in a previous conversation between him and his mother. Sudhamoyee tells his son: 'there are good people in every community. But the fear is about the bad people. They have no conscience or judgement.' 'Yes', replies the son, 'and the situation is further complicated by the arrival of lakhs of non-Bengali Muhajirs from Bihar.' So, he decides to migrate. Mandal only tells him not to forget his roots, while Abdul actually embraces Ananta for choosing to stay back. The steamer takes its anchor off and drifts towards the unknown; Kajal looks back, while his village Ujantali gradually disappears in the horizon.<sup>138</sup> The complexity of the situation and the violence that was embedded in it were thus unusual, and in view of their very mixed social meanings, it is difficult to pigeonhole them into any available typology.

This was not the kind of violence that Bengal before Partition in 1946–47 or Punjab around the time of Partition in 1947–48 had witnessed or experienced. This was not communal violence, pure and simple, for only rarely any religious symbol was overtly targeted. Yet, people were attacked because they belonged to a particular religious community, although intra-community relationships within that religious group had been historically complex and problematic. Slavoj Žižek in his 2008 book *Violence* offered us a theory of violence to consider. He distinguished between 'subjective violence', which signified a visible incident of direct violence perpetrated by a 'clearly identifiable agent', and 'objective violence' which could be 'symbolic' and/or 'systemic'. Symbolic violence pertains to language and its various forms and may include incitement and use of speech forms that asserted domination. The systemic violence is 'inherent to ... [the] "normal" state of things' and is 'invisible', yet to be taken seriously if we are to understand sudden eruptions of subjective violence. It is 'the more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence.'<sup>139</sup> While the riots in Bengal in 1946 and 1950 would fit the definition of subjective violence, what the Dalit peasants faced in East Bengal in the 1950s looked more like objective violence - both symbolic and systemic. But some problems of definition still persist.

What the Namasudra peasants faced was not the 'structural violence of untouchability' that the Dalit faced everyday for being

untouchable, and which B.R. Ambedkar sought to politicise.<sup>140</sup> It was not the violence that kept happening in what Gyanendra Pandey would call the ‘domain of the trifling’, i.e. ‘a violence that is institutionalized in practices of racism, segregation and untouchability’.<sup>141</sup> Nor it was violence that these Dalit peasants historically faced for being a religious minority; for, their identification with the Hindu community was marked by ambivalence, and Dalit-Muslim relationship was not always adversarial in colonial rural East Bengal (see [Chapter 1](#)).

So, we argue that this low-level violence of the 1950s was *conjunctural*—produced in a particular historical moment by the specific historical context of Partition and its long aftermath. What happened for a decade in East Bengal, later called East Pakistan, was an unusual situation caused by a severe resource crunch and a savage contest for scarce space—both results of Partition and Indian economic sanctions—seriously destroying the historic patterns of Dalit-Muslim relations. The process of negotiating difference which allowed the two communities to live together in close proximity in good times and bad, now began to break down under its pressure that increased incrementally. It led to persistent low-level, often invisible, incitements and provocations to encourage, if not compel, the Namasudra peasants to migrate. It was not yet an abrupt and total collapse, as not everyone experienced it personally in their own lives. But it created a general sense of insecurity and mistrust. After the murder of Banku Shikari, and similar other extreme incidents,<sup>142</sup> this sense of insecurity of the community became all too pervasive, persuading them to take that fateful decision to leave their home and land, and go to India for security and citizenship.

## **The Journey**

The journey across the Radcliffe Line turned out to be yet another strange experience of violence that these peasant migrants had never expected to endure. More significantly, some of the worst perpetrators of this violence were the two states and their low-level functionaries on both sides of the border. The migration in the end became such a traumatic experience that for many of them it brought a permanent rupture with their pasts. Those who had migrated to West Bengal immediately after the riots of 1950 had come with horrific personal memories of violence, which we have mentioned earlier (section on The Riots of 1950). And those who came after 1951 also had to endure a tremendous sense of panic and insecurity. And over and above that, they had to

undergo the upsetting experience of a horrifying journey across the border. We may try to reconstruct this migration experience first with the narrative of a personal journey.

Jatin Bala's journey from his home village Bolopota in Jessore to Kunti transit camp in Hooghly in West Bengal in 1954 has been recorded by him in graphic details in his autobiography.<sup>143</sup> Since he was born in May 1949, he was only four and half years old when his family undertook this traumatic journey in January 1954. As a result, much of this narrative is what Marianne Hirsch has called 'postmemory';<sup>144</sup> he seems to be reconstructing the story based on information received from his elders. But for all aspects of his account, we have independent corroboration from other historical records. We will eventually use that evidence to reconstruct a more general narrative of this migration experience.

Bala was born in village Pariali in the district of Jessore, but his parents because of various incidents of harassment moved to village Bolopota. In December 1953, the village was attacked by a Muslim mob and the members of the family fled to a nearby forest to hide from the raiders. The next morning, they saw their charred house and after collecting whatever was left decided to move to a more secure place. They crossed the nearby Satnol river and arrived at the Hindu majority village of Baromandartola. But even here they could not get a feeling of security, as the village was already nearly deserted. Everyone was panicky, as rumours were rife about robbery, arson, rape, murder, and above all, about Muhajirs collecting in nearby villages and preparing to attack them. In such a situation, his elder brother with other senior members of the extended family discussed the migration option with twenty-two other families and decided to move to India. Migration was a risky adventure, and so they wanted to move in a large group. Some of them went to Dacca to get migration certificates.<sup>145</sup> It took about seven days to get the papers and then the fateful journey began.

Twenty-seven members of five related families left Baromandartola on foot; a few other related families were to join them at the border. They walked 23 miles along the Jessore Road to reach the border check-post at Benapole. On the road, he saw people being sick and left to die by the wayside, the stress of the journey having a toll on humanity. Almost from a mile before the check-post, the Jessore Road was full of people who had walked for eight, ten to twelve days and were waiting to be cleared by the Pakistani border officials. When they reached the check-post, they faced the brutalities perpetrated by the two states through their low-level functionaries. The male officials on the Pakistani

side verbally abused them in a way that betrayed their bitter dislike for these people. They searched them thoroughly for any hidden valuables, touching freely all parts of their bodies, women being shown no special respect. And then they pushed them onto the other side of the border. On the Indian side, the check-post was at Petrapole, where their papers were checked again, and the family members went through the same indignities all over again, along with verbal and physical abuse that unmistakably made them feel unwanted and unwelcome.

At the India border, a few more families joined the Balas: they were now eighty-one members belonging to fifteen families. Together, they started the long walk to the Bongaon railway station, where they had to wait for seven days to get on a train to Calcutta. The Bongaon Junction station had, in the meanwhile, become a living hell, where thousands of refugees waited for days without any civic facilities. There were only two hand tube wells for water supply, one latrine for women, and two for men. Some non-government organisations (NGOs) occasionally distributed some dry food; other than that, there was no government relief. On the station platforms, people died, pregnant women gave birth, people were robbed, and young women were abducted. Of the eighty-one members of the group that came together to Bongaon station, seven of them, both adults and children, died before the group could leave for Calcutta.

The train to Sealdah station in Calcutta was obviously overcrowded, yet it at least promised to take them to their final destination. But life at the next stop was hardly pleasant. At any given time, there were 5,000 to 10,000 refugees staying on the Sealdah railway station platforms, which were so full that the families could only get some space to sit and put their belongings, and here they had to wait for four to five days for the processing of their papers. There were only three hand tube wells, three toilets for women, and eight for men to service these thousands of refugees. And over and above that, they had to endure the disdain of the local train passengers, the thuggery of the local ruffians, the apathy of the state, and the abusive behaviour of its lower-level officials. Only a few NGOs occasionally distributed some dry food, the quantity never being enough for a family. After six days, the Bala family got its allocation to a refugee camp. The family was split: the elder brother was to go to Kunti Transit camp, while the second brother was sent to Bhandarhati. Jatin being the youngest and a minor, was to accompany his elder brother.

Then there was the last leg of the journey, which was again a hellish experience. They were put into an open truck—altogether



ten families were in the same truck. This meant about fifty people huddled into a small space, where they could only stand next to each other. There was no space to move, let alone sit. And the truck was meant to travel for ten to twelve hours and was not supposed to stop en route before reaching the destination. As refugees were meant to be segregated, any stoppage might give them an opportunity to escape. So, when because of the bumpy ride, a pregnant woman felt like giving birth, the truck driver refused to stop. The woman ultimately gave birth on the running truck in front of everyone. The journey which had started at around three in the afternoon, ended early in the next morning. They reached the Kunti camp and that marked the beginning of another phase of their migrant life and struggle, which we will discuss in [Chapter 3](#). What needs to be emphasised here is that the story that Bala recounts is not an exaggeration and can be verified from other first-person narratives, media reports, and official archives.

As for the migration experience, the Balas were indeed fortunate as they lived close to the borders. For those who came from the interior of East Bengal and had to traverse long distances to reach the borders, the journey was even more arduous. There was no ‘secure means of transport’; for those who chose to travel by train, the speed of escape could not provide them with any extra sense of safety or dignity.<sup>146</sup> Jyotirmoy Mandal, retracing his family’s journey by Barisal Express to Benapole, narrates in detail his harassment at the hands of the Pakistani police at the check-post.<sup>147</sup> One of our interviewees tells us how people were robbed of all their life’s savings in broad daylight while waiting at railway stations for trains.<sup>148</sup> Media reports suggest that it was distance rather than speed of transport that was a crucial variable in this migration experience. The journey for those like the Mandal family, who came from the interior of East Bengal, was more stressful as thousands of people often had to wait for days at the railway stations and steamer *ghats* to get a seat on available transport to the border. At Khulna station on a given day, 8,000 to 10,000 people would be waiting for the few available trains to India. Tickets in those trains were sold by touts at a premium price, which was four to five times higher than the normal price.<sup>149</sup>

There were many reports of long-distance trains like the Barisal Express, Assam Mail, and Chittagong Express heading towards India being stopped at different stations and the passengers being harassed in various ways.<sup>150</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika* reported that Calcutta-bound trains and steamers were attacked by gangs of

goons who robbed the passengers and, in some cases abducted women.<sup>151</sup> And not just random goons, the migrants were also robbed by the low-level state officials. Multiple media reports suggest that when the Khulna–Calcutta Express, popularly known as Barisal Express, reached Benapole check-post, the Pakistani Customs Officers, and Ansars took away from the refugees everything that had any value, such as gold ornaments and brass utensils.<sup>152</sup> According to another report, at Darshana station on an average day, gold ornaments worth about Rs. 600,000 were seized by the customs officials.<sup>153</sup>

Indian police records also reveal that trains were stopped at check-posts and the refugees were stripped of all their possessions. The refugees were only allowed to bring in ‘wearing apparels, and old clothings, beddings, cash not exceeding Rs 50’. All their other belongings were taken away and the list of confiscated goods included utensils, watches, and fountain pens.<sup>154</sup> A Congress Central Relief Committee report observed that the refugees were arriving with no belonging whatsoever, as ‘they were relieved of their possessions while crossing the border from Darsana to Joynagar.’<sup>155</sup>

So people tried to hide things, particularly valuable possessions, and jewelleries, and consequently were subjected to further indignities by the custom officials and border guards, and stories of physical searches of women in trains and stations, with lights switched off, began to circulate.<sup>156</sup> As one Indian Police Intelligence note observed: ‘Reports received reveal that women refugees are often subjected to most humiliating condition by Pakistani soldiers in the name of the Customs search.’<sup>157</sup> The Government of West Bengal sent a formal protest to Pakistani authorities against such treatment of passengers in India bound Chittagong Express, Dacca Mail, and Barisal Express.<sup>158</sup> At the border those who tried to avoid the check-posts and cross it on foot or by boat were stopped at various points, searched, and stripped of their belongings. Where they tried to escape, they were fired upon.<sup>159</sup>

When these refugees arrived at Sealdah station by train, the situation there was equally unbearable. *Amrita Bazar Patrika* gave a graphic description of the squalid conditions at the Sealdah station in October 1948, when the post-Partition refugees had only started to arrive.<sup>160</sup> One could imagine how the situation looked like when their numbers increased manifold after 1950. When the refugees reached Sealdah Station, wrote an *Amrita Bazar Patrika* staff reporter on 21 April 1950, they could immediately feel a ‘sense of personal security’. But beyond that,

the 10,000 or more refugees who lived in the open-air refugee camp at the station, which had become 'veritable hell on earth', lived a life in conditions that could be best described as 'a no man's land between life and death'.<sup>161</sup> *Jugantar* ran a long report narrating how young refugee girls and women were enticed by agents into the flesh trade that flourished in hotels around Sealdah station. Many of these unfortunate women ultimately ended up in the red-light districts of Calcutta.<sup>162</sup> Jatin Bala's description of the harrowing journey of his family and the appalling conditions at the Sealdah station was, after all, not a figment of imagination.

But despite all the pain, risks, and hazards, the Dalit peasants of East Bengal continued to undertake this westward journey up until 1957, when finally, the flow stopped due to coercive measures of the Indian state, desperately trying to stop this migration. First of all, 1955 was announced as the cut-off date of migration for receiving any relief and rehabilitation from the Indian government. In 1956, purposefully the migration certificate system was made more difficult by subjecting it to stricter scrutiny. It involved counselling at the Indian High Commission in Dacca, where intending migrants were made aware of the conditions in the camps and the possibility of being rehabilitated outside Bengal. This reportedly reduced the list of potential migrants, which at that time numbered about 75,000.<sup>163</sup> The exodus finally stopped in 1957 because in that year 'the borders were sealed'. This meant that: 'No refugee family in that year was allowed to migrate unless he had some relations in the Indian Union who could look after him. He had to give a declaration that he would not claim any rehabilitation benefits when he came to Indian Union.'<sup>164</sup> On the floor of the Indian parliament, the central Rehabilitation Minister Mehr Chand Khanna unabashedly defended this policy by saying that there were already 4.2 million refugees in the eastern region, and their rehabilitation was proving to be a huge problem. So, the government was in no way willing to take any more refugees from East Pakistan.<sup>165</sup> From now on heavy surveillance and patrolling made border crossing extremely difficult, if not virtually impossible. The Radcliffe Line, by this time, was no longer an indeterminate imaginary border, but a real dividing line between the two nation-states.

In every sense, the Dalit peasant migration of the 1950s fitted Charles Tilly's definition of 'Coerced Migration', which meant 'obligatory departure, forced severing of most or all ties at the origin'.<sup>166</sup> On the eve of Partition, Gandhi and Nehru reportedly

gave Dalit leader P.R. Thakur the solemn pledge (mentioned in [Chapter 1](#)) that if the East Bengali Dalit peasants were subjected to any such coerced migration in the wake of Partition, their rehabilitation would be taken care of by the Indian state. As we mentioned earlier, Shyama Prasad Mukherji also made the same promise. But the Nehruvian government clearly reneged on that promise when the time came to redeem it; we will narrate that story of breach of trust in the subsequent chapters.

We reiterate here that the story we have narrated above establishes the fact that the Dalit peasants of East Pakistan left their land and hearths in the 1950s because they felt insecure in their own homes. And that sense of insecurity severed their emotional ties to the land and motivated them to migrate to India, which promised the possibilities of full citizenship and security. The experience of migration was qualitatively so very different and difficult from anything that these peasants had ever faced in life that it created for them a permanent rupture with their past as peasants in East Bengal. Most of them, unlike the earlier *savarna* -middle-class refugees, never wanted to go back to their homeland again, as their life there was not all that rosy. There was little to be romantic or nostalgic about that past.<sup>167</sup> But when they arrived at the other side of the border, they did not get a fair deal. They became parts of a homogenised ‘undignified generation’ called ‘refugees’, wrote one of them in his recollection of those hurtful days of transition.<sup>168</sup>

For these Dalit peasants, this painful westward journey constituted that liminal phase of transition to a new historical consciousness of refugeehood—a consciousness of being a person without a homeland. They left their ancestral homeland where they had become aliens; in the new homeland for the Hindus, they were unwelcome and were considered to be a burden. In this new homeland, most of them had to start their life in the segregated spaces of refugee camps in West Bengal and had to wait for years for the Indian state to come up with a rehabilitation plan. We will tell that story in [Chapter 3](#).

<sup>1</sup> Until 1956, East Pakistan remained officially known as East Bengal.

<sup>2</sup> See ‘Report of the Bengal Boundary Commission’, GI, Reforms Office, F. No. 68/47-R, NAI.

<sup>3</sup> Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947–1967*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, 111–19; Sandip Bandyopadhyay, ‘The Riddles of Partition: Memories of the Bengali Hindus’, in R. Samaddar, ed., *Reflections on the Partition in the East*, New Delhi, Vikas Publishing House, 66–69.

<sup>4</sup> Prafulla Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left*

*Political Syndrome in West Bengal*, Calcutta, Naya Uddog, 1999, 1. According to another Report, of the Bengali refugees who entered India by January 1948, '12.4% belong[ed] to the poor class, 45.3% belong[ed] to the lower middle class, 26.8% belong[ed] to the upper-middle-class, and 15.5% belong[ed] to the rich class'. Cited in Anindita Ghoshal, *Refugees, Borders and Identities: Rights and Habitat in East and Northeast India*, London and New York, Routledge, 2021, 63.

<sup>5</sup> Udit Sen, 'Building Bijoygarh: A Microhistory of Refugee Squatting in Calcutta', in Tanika Sarkar and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, eds., *Calcutta: The Stormy Decades*, New Delhi, Social Science Press, 2015, 407–33.

<sup>6</sup> For an explanation as to why Bengal remained relatively peaceful compared to Punjab, see Manjeet S. Pardesi and Sumit Ganguly, 'Violent Punjab, Quiescent Bengal, and the Partition of India', *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 57:1, 2019, 21–24.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in T.Y. Tan and G. Kudaisya, *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia*, London and New York, Routledge, 2000, 46.

<sup>8</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika*, 1 January 1948.

<sup>9</sup> Jagadish Chandra Mandal, *Mahapran Jogendranath o Babasaheb Ambedkar*, Kolkata, Biswas Publisher, 1999, 112; Dwaipayana Sen, *The Decline of the Caste Question: Jogendranath Mandal and the Defeat of Dalit Politics in Bengal*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, 181–87.

<sup>10</sup> Sen, *The Decline of the Caste Question*, 185–86.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Dhananjay Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1981, 399.

<sup>12</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika*, 27 January 1948.

<sup>13</sup> Jogendranath Mandal to Nurul Amin, 19 January 1950. We are indebted to Jagadish Chandra Mandal for a typed copy of this letter.

<sup>14</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika*, 12 April 1950.

<sup>15</sup> Azad, 24 July, 9 October 1950.

<sup>16</sup> Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition*, 112.

<sup>17</sup> 'Report Regarding Influx of East Bengal Refugees at Sealdah R/S', dt. 3 June 1952, IB, F. No. 982/48-Sealdah, WBSA.

<sup>18</sup> Ghazal Asif, 'Jogendranath Mandal and the Politics of Dalit Recognition in Pakistan', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 43:1, 2020, 119–35, quotations from 120.

<sup>19</sup> Masayuki Usuda, 'Pushed Towards the Partition: Jogendra Nath Mandal and the Constrained Namasudra Movement', in H. Kotani, ed., *Caste System, Untouchability and the Depressed*, New Delhi, Manohar, 1997, 221–74; Asif, 'Jogendranath Mandal', 121–23, 127–30.

<sup>20</sup> Sen, *The Decline of the Caste Question*, 187–90.

<sup>21</sup> Beth Roy, *Some Trouble with Cows: Making Sense of Social Conflict*, New Delhi, Vistaar Publications, 1994.

<sup>22</sup> Sumallya Mukhopadhyay, 'Thinking of Migration Through Caste: Reading Oral Narratives of "Displaced Person(s)" From East Pakistan (1950–1970)', *Journal of Migration Affairs*, II:1, September 2019, 123.

<sup>23</sup> A.H.A. Kamal, 'Peasant Rebellions and the Muslim League Government in East Bengal, 1947–54', in D. Chakrabarty, R. Majumdar, and A. Sartori, eds., *From the Colonial to the Postcolonial: India and Pakistan in Transition*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2007, 203–4, 217.

<sup>24</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika*, 12 February 1949.

<sup>25</sup> For a recent evaluation of this situation, see Anwesha Sengupta,

'[Breaking up Bengal](#): People, Things and Land in Times of Partition', unpublished PhD thesis, JNU, 2015, 129–51.

<sup>26</sup> Asif, 'Jogendranath Mandal', 132.

<sup>27</sup> These interlocking webs of mutual vulnerabilities were pithily expressed in a folk poem of East Bengal from around this time:

*Gandhi morlo guli khaia*

*Jinnah adhmora*

*Barno Hindu polaia gelo*

*Charal porlem dhora.*

We are indebted to Anwesha Sengupta for supplying this poem used in a Bangladeshi film *Ontorjatra* (Director: Tareque and Catherine Masud; Maasranga Production).

<sup>28</sup> Swati Sengupta Chatterjee, *West Bengal Camp Refugees: Dispersal and Caste Question 1950–1965*, Kolkata, Sreejoni, 2019, 27–28.

<sup>29</sup> *Jugantar*, 3 January 1950; *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 24 February 1950.

<sup>30</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 11 February 1950.

<sup>31</sup> 'THE HON'BLE THE PRIME MINISTER'S PRESS CONFERENCE', All India Hindu Mahasabha Papers, F. No. P-129/1950, NMML. See also *Jugantar*, 7 February 1950.

<sup>32</sup> *Jugantar*, 13 March 1950.

<sup>33</sup> 'Horrible Atrocities on East Bengal Hindus', All India Hindu Mahasabha Papers, F. No. P-129/1950, NMML.

<sup>34</sup> *The Statesman*, 2 February 1950.

<sup>35</sup> For several such statements, see All India Hindu Mahasabha Papers, F. No. P-129/1950, NMML. Also, for examples of inflammatory reports in the media, see *Jugantar*, 3 January, 2 February, 4 February, 7 February, 9 February, 10 February, 24 February, 28 February, 14 March, 16 March 1950.

<sup>36</sup> For more details on the riots, see Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Decolonization in South Asia: Meanings of Freedom in Post-Independence West Bengal, 1947–52*, London and New York, Routledge, 2009, 48–61; Haimanti Roy, *Partitioned Lives: Migrants, Refugees, Citizens in India and Pakistan, 1947–1965*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2012, 164–76.

<sup>37</sup> Chatterji, 'Of Graveyards and Ghettos', 228–29.

<sup>38</sup> Cited in [Ghoshal, \*Refugees, Borders and Identities\*](#), 31.

<sup>39</sup> For details on these riots, see Biswas and Sato, *Religion and Politics in Bangladesh and West Bengal: A Study of Communal Relations*, Joint Research Programme Series No. 99, Tokyo, Institute of Developing Economies, 1993, 34–44.

<sup>40</sup> Saroj Chakrabarty, *With Dr B.C. Roy and Other Chief Ministers*, Calcutta, Benson's, 1974, 155–56.

<sup>41</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 11 February 1950.

<sup>42</sup> 'Statement made by the Hon'ble Prime Minister in Parliament on 23 February 1950, regarding recent events in East and West Bengal', S.P. Mukherji Papers, II–IV Instalment, F. No. 160, NMML.

<sup>43</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 24 February 1950.

<sup>44</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru, *Letters to Chief Ministers 1947–1964*, vol. 2, 1950–52, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1986, 57. For such sensational one-sided reporting, see *Jugantar*, 11 March, 16 March, 17 March, 21 March, 28 May, 16 June 1950.

<sup>45</sup> Nehru, *Letters to Chief Ministers*, 23.

<sup>46</sup> See for example *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 30 December 1949, 6 February 1950; *Jugantar*, 11 March, 16 March, 17 March, 21 March, 28 May, 16 June 1950.

<sup>47</sup> Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha, 'Grave Situation in Bengal: Bengal Hindu Mahasabha's Demand for Transfer of Population'; also see 'Appalling Situation in East Bengal', All India Hindu Mahasabha Papers, F. No. C-188/1950, NMML. For more discussion on the complicity of the Hindu Mahasabha in the riots of 1950, see [Bandyopadhyay, \*Decolonization in South Asia\*](#), 54–55.

<sup>48</sup> For a retelling of these memories, see Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, 'Nostalgia of "Desh", Memories of Partition', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25 December 2004, 5653–60; Subhasri Ghosh and Debjani Dutta, 'Forgotten Voices From the P.L. Camps', in J. Bagchi and S. Dasgupta, eds., *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, vol. 2, Kolkata, Stree, 2009, 199–222.

<sup>49</sup> B.S. Guha, *Department of Anthropology, Government of India, Memoir No. 1, 1954, Studies in Social Tensions Among the Refugees From Eastern Pakistan*, Delhi, Manager of Publication, 1959, ix, 23–34.

<sup>50</sup> See for details, Joya Chatterji, 'Of Graveyards and Ghettos: Muslims in Partitioned West Bengal 1947–67', in M. Hasan and A. Roy, eds., *Living Together Separately: Cultural India in History and Politics*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005, 228–29. For evidence of widespread anti-Muslim attitudes in Nadia in 1950, also see, Willem van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*, London, Anthem Press, 2005, 99.

<sup>51</sup> Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices From the Partition of India*, London, Hurst & Co., 2000, 247. However, Butalia concludes this on the basis of only one testimony.

<sup>52</sup> [Chakrabarty, \*With Dr B.C. Roy and Other Chief Ministers\*](#), 106.

<sup>53</sup> Paula Banerjee and Sucharita Sengupta, 'The Refugee Movement: A Founding Moment of Popular Movement', in Ranabir Samaddar, ed., *From Popular Movements to Rebellion: The Naxalite Decade*, New Delhi, Social Science Press, 2018, 27.

<sup>54</sup> *Jugantar*, 10 March 1950.

<sup>55</sup> Pallavi Raghavan, *Animosity at Bay: An Alternative History of the India–Pakistan Relationship, 1947–1952*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2020, 50, 66–67.

<sup>56</sup> For more details on the impact of Delhi Pact, see [Bandyopadhyay, \*Decolonization in South Asia\*](#), 56–57; [Ghoshal, \*Refugees, Borders and Identities\*](#), 68–69.

<sup>57</sup> From the Deputy High Commissioner for the United Kingdom in Pakistan, Dacca, Weekly Report No. 22 for the period ending on 1 June 1950, IOR: L/P&J/5/326.

<sup>58</sup> Dilip Halder, *Atrocities on Dalits since the Partition of Bengal*, New Delhi, Mittal Publications, 2008, 20.

<sup>59</sup> Report for week ending 26 November 1950, IB, F. No. 1838-48, Part III, WBSA.

<sup>60</sup> Notes on interrogation of refugees, IB, F. No. 982-48, WBSA.

<sup>61</sup> Halder, *Atrocities on Dalits*, 22; [Ghoshal, \*Refugees, Borders and Identities\*](#), 65.

<sup>62</sup> Samir Das, 'Refugee Crisis: Responses of the Government of West



Bengal', in Pradip Kumar Bose, ed., *Refugees in West Bengal: Institutional Practices and Contested Identities*, Calcutta, Calcutta Research Group, 2000, 12.

<sup>63</sup> Report on the Political Activities of the Refugees and Corruption in Refugee Camps for the week ending 3 September 1950, IB, F. No. 1838-48, Pt III, WBSA.

<sup>64</sup> WBLAP, 13 March 1952, 37.

<sup>65</sup> Copy of a report of a D.I.O. of Nadia district, IB, F. No. 1238-47 (Nadia), WBSA.

<sup>66</sup> Supdt. of Police, Nadia to the District Magistrate, Nadia, and others, dt. 25 December 1950, IB, F. No. 1238-47 (Nadia), WBSA.

<sup>67</sup> See for details, [Bandyopadhyay, \*Decolonization in South Asia\*](#), 169.

<sup>68</sup> Copy of a report by Deputy S.P. (North), 13 April 1951, IB, F. No. K.W., 1238-47 (Nadia), WBSA. Section 4 of the Act provided that no unauthorised occupant would be evicted until the state had first provided for alternative land or house. See Joya Chatterji, 'Right or Charity? The Debate Over Relief and Rehabilitation in West Bengal, 1947–1950', in Suvir Kaul, ed., *The Partitions of Memory: The Afterlife of the Division of India*, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2001, 100.

<sup>69</sup> See for evidence, Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, 'Unravelling the Past: Remembering the Communal Violence in Hooghly, 1950', in J. Bagchi and S. Dasgupta, eds., *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, vol. 2, Kolkata, Stree, 2009, 235–44.

<sup>70</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika*, 20 April 1950.

<sup>71</sup> Renuka Roy, 'And Still they Come', in J. Bagchi and S. Dasgupta, eds., *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, Kolkata, Stree, 2003, 83.

<sup>72</sup> For more details on Mukherji's movement, see [Bandyopadhyay, \*Decolonization in South Asia\*](#), 149–50.

<sup>73</sup> From the Deputy High Commissioner for the United Kingdom in India, Calcutta, to the High Commissioner for the United Kingdom in India, New Delhi, Fortnightly Report No. 9 period ending 4 May 1950, IOR: L/P&J/5/320.

<sup>74</sup> Copy of a D.I.O.'s Report dt. 25 April 1950, IB, F. No. 1809/48 (Nadia), WBSA.

<sup>75</sup> 'East Bengal And Kashmir Problems', Speech by Shri N.C. Chatterjee, MP to the Lok Sabha on Foreign Affairs debate on 31 March 1955, 18–19.

<sup>76</sup> This did not mean that Chatterjee's sympathies for the 'Hindu minority' in East Pakistan was diminishing. At the beginning of 1958, when Dalit migration had already been forcibly stopped by the GI, he was again talking about how the 'minorities in East Bengal' were being 'terrorised and persecuted' by the Pakistani regime. His 'minority' this time obviously did not include the Dalit Hindus. See reports of meetings in *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 3 February, 25 February 1958.

<sup>77</sup> 'Report Regarding Influx of East Bengal Refugees at Sealdah R/S', dt. 3 June 1952, IB, F. No. 982/48-Sealdah; 'Report on the Exodus of Hindus From East Pakistan', dt. 8 October 1952, IB, F. No. 982-48, WBSA. *Relief and Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons in West Bengal*, Calcutta, Home (Publications) Department, Government of West Bengal, 1956, 17.

<sup>78</sup> Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition*, 112, [Table 3.1](#).

<sup>79</sup> See, Abhijit Dasgupta, *Displacement and Exile: The State–Refugee*

*Relations in India*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2016, 32.

<sup>80</sup> See for example, the letter from the refugees of Murshidabad to S.P. Mukherji, dt. 3 May 1950, S.P. Mukherji Papers, Subject F. No. 34, NMML.

<sup>81</sup> Report regarding the exodus of Hindus from Pakistan to Indian Union through Basirhat subdivision border, 24-Parganas, dt. 30 October 1951, IB, F. No. 982/48, WBSA.

<sup>82</sup> Note dt. 28 October 1951, IB, F. No. 982/48, WBSA. Also see Rup Kumar Barman, *Partition of India and Its Impact on the Scheduled Caste of Bengal*, Kolkata, Abhijeet Publications, 2012.

<sup>83</sup> For district-wise distribution of SC population in West Bengal, see Dasgupta, *Displacement and Exile*, 32–37.

<sup>84</sup> Roy, 'And Still They Come', 84, 96–97.

<sup>85</sup> 'Report Regarding Influx of East Bengal Refugees at Sealdah R/S', dt. 3 June 1952, IB, F. No. 982-48-Sealdah, WBSA.

<sup>86</sup> *Jugantar*, 9 October 1950. He received death threats for defecting to India. *Jugantar*, 26 October 1950.

<sup>87</sup> *The Statesman*, 9 October 1950.

<sup>88</sup> *Jugantar*, 30 October 1950.

<sup>89</sup> The letter is reproduced in Tathagata Roy, *A Suppressed Chapter in History: The Exodus of Hindus from East Pakistan and Bangladesh 1947–2006*, New Delhi, Bookwell, 2007, Appendix B, 469–92.

<sup>90</sup> For an alternative reading, see Sen, *The Decline of the Caste Question*, 202–4. For another reading see, Asif, 'Jogendranath Mandal', 130–32.

<sup>91</sup> Roy, *A Suppressed Chapter*, 490.

<sup>92</sup> It is interesting that this letter has recently been used by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party to justify its controversial Citizenship Amendment Act 2019. See Bharatiya Janata Party, *Nagarikatawa Sangsodhani Ain—2019* (Citizenship Amendment Act 2019), 8–11.

<sup>93</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 10 October 1950.

<sup>94</sup> Quoted in Dasgupta, *Displacement and Exile*, 48.

<sup>95</sup> We would like to emphasise that we get these migrant statements through the interrogating Police Intelligence Officers. The following description is based on numerous reports in two files, IB, F. Nos. 982/48 and 982-48-Sealdah, WBSA.

<sup>96</sup> Secret report dt. 10 June 1952, IB, F. No. 982-48-Sealdah, WBSA.

<sup>97</sup> Report regarding influx of East Bengal refugees at Sealdah, dt. 3 June 1952, IB, F. No. 982-48, WBSA.

<sup>98</sup> From the Deputy High Commissioner for the United Kingdom in Pakistan, Dacca, Weekly Report No. 2 for the period ending 12 January 1950 and Weekly Report No. 4 for the period ending 26 January 1950, IOR: L/P&J/5/326; from the Deputy High Commissioner for the United Kingdom in India, Calcutta, to the High Commissioner for the United Kingdom in India, New Delhi, Fortnightly Report No. 1 period ending 12 January 1950 and Fortnightly Report No. 6 period ending 29 December 1950, IOR: L/P&J/5/320; To Honourable Sardar Ballabh Bhai Patel, Opinion of the East Bengal Relief Committee, S.P. Mukherji Papers, Subject F. No. 34, NMML.

<sup>99</sup> Statement of Kesab Dhali (25), s/o Uttam Chandra, village Dakab, P.S. Dakab, District Khulna, IB, F. No. 982-48, WBSA.

<sup>100</sup> Secret Report dt. 9 June 1952, IB, F. No. 982-48-Sealdah, WBSA.

<sup>101</sup> Statement of Sri Sarat Kumar Halder, s/o Sri Chandra Kumar of

Pirojpur town, P.S. Pirojpur, District Barisal, IB, F. No. 982-48, WBSA.

<sup>102</sup> Deputy Director, SIB, Calcutta, to Deputy Director (A), Intelligence Bureau, GI, dt. 29 October 1952, IB, F. No. 982-48, WBSA.

<sup>103</sup> Note dt. 15 October 1952, IB, F. No. 982-48, WBSA.

<sup>104</sup> Testimony of Kesab Dhali (25), s/o Uttam Chandraa, village Dakab, PS Dakab, District Khulna, IB, F. No. 982-48, WBSA.

<sup>105</sup> Weekly Report No. 16 for the period ending the 20 April 1950 from the Deputy High Commissioner for the United Kingdom in Pakistan, Dacca, IOR: L/P&J/5/326.

<sup>106</sup> Roy, *Partitioned Lives*, 185–95.

<sup>107</sup> Dasgupta, *Displacement and Exile*, 20–21.

<sup>108</sup> Barry N. Stein, 'The Refugee Experience: Defining the Parameters of a Field Study', *The International Migration Review*, 15:1–2, *Refugees Today*, Spring–Summer 1981, 320–30, quotation in 321–22.

<sup>109</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status* (Geneva, 1979), 14, quoted in Andrew E. Shacknove, 'Who Is a Refugee?', *Ethics*, 95:2, 1985, 275.

<sup>110</sup> Dasgupta, *Displacement and Exile*, 19.

<sup>111</sup> Shacknove, 'Who Is a Refugee?', 281. Deriving insights from Thomas Hobbes and Hannah Arendt, Patricia Owens also gives a similar argument. See Patricia Owens, 'Reclaiming "Bare Life"? Against Agamben on Refugees', *International Relations*, 23:4, 2009, 567–82, specially 570.

<sup>112</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Inhabitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies*, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2002, 140–41.

<sup>113</sup> For this concept, see Willem van Schendel, 'Stateless in South Asia: The Making of India and Bangladesh Enclaves', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 61:1, 2002, 115–47.

<sup>114</sup> Cited in Raghavan, *Animosity at Bay*, 64.

<sup>115</sup> Weekly Report No. 19 for the period ending the 11 May 1950 from the Deputy High Commissioner for the United Kingdom in Pakistan, Dacca, IOR: L/P&J/5/326.

<sup>116</sup> V.F.-Y. Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2007, 19–20.

<sup>117</sup> Ravinder Kaur, *Since 1947: Partition Narratives Among Punjabi Migrants of Delhi*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2007, 70.

<sup>118</sup> Roy, *Partitioned Lives*, 147–76.

<sup>119</sup> *Census of Pakistan*, 1951, Provisional Tables of Population, Census Bulletin No. 1, Table 6.5.

<sup>120</sup> Dasgupta, *Displacement and Exile*, 19.

<sup>121</sup> From Dy. Secy. Govt. of West Bengal to Dy. Secy. Govt. of East Bengal, Home (Pol.) Dept., dt. 10 June 1952, IB, F. No. 982-48-Sealdah, WBSA.

<sup>122</sup> The reports examined below are in IB, F. No. 982-48-Sealdah, WBSA.

<sup>123</sup> Confidential Report dt. 18 May 1952, IB, F. No. 982-48-Sealdah, WBSA.

<sup>124</sup> Secret Report dt. 4 April 1952 and 16 May 1952, IB, F. No. 982-48-Sealdah, WBSA.

<sup>125</sup> Notes on interrogation of refugees, IB, F. No. 982-48, WBSA.

<sup>126</sup> Note dt. 28 October 1951, IB, F. No. 982-48, WBSA

<sup>127</sup> Testimonies in IB, F. No. 982-48, WBSA.

<sup>128</sup> Extract from report on the Migrants' Traffic Between East Pakistan and West Bengal, checked on 29 May 1951 at Banpur railway station, IB, F. No. 982-48, WBSA.

<sup>129</sup> Ghosh and Dutta, 'Forgotten Voices', 203–4.

<sup>130</sup> Spl. Supdt. of Police, IB, CID, West Bengal, to Supdt. of Police, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Cooch Behar, West Dinajpur, Malda, dt. 15 November 1951; Deputy Inspector General of Police, IB, CID, West Bengal, to Deputy Director (OSD), SIB, Calcutta, dt. 18 December 1951; also Note dt. 17 December 1951, IB, F. No. 982-48, WBSA.

<sup>131</sup> Jatin Bala, *Shikorchenra Jiban: Udbastu Daliter Dalil* (Uprooted Life: The Testament of a Dalit Refugee), Kolkata: Gangchil, 2018, 118–20. Refugee testimonies recorded by Ghosh and Dutta, 'Forgotten Voices', 199–222, also indicate the role of rumour.

<sup>132</sup> Jayanti Basu, *Reconstructing the Bengal Partition: The Psyche Under a Different Violence*, Calcutta, Samya, 2013, xxiii.

<sup>133</sup> Roy, *Partitioned Lives*, 22, 147–76.

<sup>134</sup> Renubala Debnath from village Muladi in Barisal district informed us that even though her father and uncle were killed in the riot of 1950, she and other members of her family were given shelter by her Muslim neighbour for about a month till the situation settled down. Renubala Debnath, interview with Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, Jirat, Hooghly, 3 November 2001. For similar evidence from refugee testimony, see Ghosh and Dutta, 'Forgotten Voices', 202–3, 204, 205, 209, 212.

<sup>135</sup> Bala, *Shikorchenra Jiban*, 118–20.

<sup>136</sup> Bala, *Shikorchenra Jiban*, 110.

<sup>137</sup> Paper cutting: *Daily Telegraph*, dt. 10 March 1964, IOR: MSS.Eur. 158/106.

<sup>138</sup> Kapil Krishna Thakur, *Ujantali Upakatha (The Tales of Ujantali)*, Second edition, Kolkata, Chaturtha Duniya, 2005, 199, 203–7.

<sup>139</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence*, London, Profile Books, 2008, 1–2, 8.

<sup>140</sup> Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*, Ranikhet, Permanent Black, 2009, 124.

<sup>141</sup> Gyanendra Pandey, 'Introduction', in G. Pandey, ed., *Unarchived Histories: The "Mad" and the "Trifling" in the Colonial and Postcolonial World*, London and New York, Routledge, 2014, 8, 14.

<sup>142</sup> A similar incident of a big robbery in the house of a rich Namasudra peasant Kishori Sarkar of Ramkrishnadi in the district of Dacca was reported in May 1950. See Report of the Assistant Central Intelligence Officer of Jalpaiguri, 18 May 1950 on the Communal situation, IB, F. No. 1238-47 (Jalpaiguri), WBSA. For similar incidents, see [Sengupta Chatterjee](#), *West Bengal Camp Refugees*, 28–29.

<sup>143</sup> The following description of Jatin Bala's journey has been reconstructed from [Bala](#), *Shikorchenra Jiban*, 7–32, 103–79; and Jatin Bala, *Jiban juddher jamana (The Age of Struggle for Life)*, Kolkata, Chaturtha Duniya, 2016, 7–8.

<sup>144</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, 3–6.

<sup>145</sup> After introduction of passport by the Indian government in October 1952, only those with 'migration certificates' issued by the Indian consulate

office in Dacca could legally enter India.

<sup>146</sup> We make this point with reference to the argument made by Ravinder Kaur that: 'The speed at which one flees becomes essential to one's safety and very survival.' So, the means of transport becomes a crucial determinant of migrant experience. [Kaur, \*Since 1947\*](#), 69, 80–81.

<sup>147</sup> Deep Halder, *Blood Island: An Oral History of the Marichjhapi Massacre*, Noida, HarperCollins, 2019, 30–31.

<sup>148</sup> Interview with Gyanendra Nath Haldar, Calcutta, dt. 20 June 2013.

<sup>149</sup> *Jugantar*, 16 March, 2 April 1950.

<sup>150</sup> *Jugantar*, 11 March, 16 March 1950.

<sup>151</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 2 March 1950.

<sup>152</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 20 March 1950. *Jugantar*, 21 March 1950.

<sup>153</sup> *Jugantar*, 27 March 1950.

<sup>154</sup> Report on the Exodus of Hindus from East Pakistan, dt. 8 October 1952, IB, F. No. 982-48, WBSA.

<sup>155</sup> The minutes of the meeting of the Executive Committee of Central Relief Committee held on 18 April 1950, AICC Papers (2nd Instalment), F. No. 3738A, NMML.

<sup>156</sup> Note dt. 15 October 1952; statement of Sri Sarat Kumar Haldar, s/o Sri Chandra Kumar of Pirojpur town, P.S. Pirojpur, District Barisal, IB, F. No. 982-48, WBSA.

<sup>157</sup> Note dt. 15 October 1952, IB, F. No. 982-48, WBSA.

<sup>158</sup> Dy. Secy., Govt. of West Bengal to Chief Secy., Govt. of East Bengal, 13 October 1952, IB, F. No. 982-48, WBSA.

<sup>159</sup> From Deputy Director, SIB, Calcutta, to Deputy Director (A), Intelligence Bureau, GI, 29 October 1952, IB, F. No. 982-48, WBSA.

<sup>160</sup> 'How do these refugees spend their days and nights on the station platform? ... Imagine ... a healthy baby eating and playing by the side of cholera patient. Imagine again sleeping in a place a few feet away from a room which is used by thousands as a latrine and which remains unwashed for days together. Imagine, again, cooking your food on the bricks with rubbish as fuel on the street along which pass hundreds of motor cars, lorries and other kinds of vehicles. This is how they spend their days.' *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 8 October 1948.

<sup>161</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 21 April 1950.

<sup>162</sup> *Jugantar*, 11 June 1950.

<sup>163</sup> *Swadhinata*, 9 April 1956. For more discussion on these measures, see [Dasgupta, \*Displacement and Exile\*](#), 47.

<sup>164</sup> Renuka Ray to Morarji Desai, Finance Minister, GI, 29 October 1960, Renuka Ray Papers, Subject F. No. 5, NMML.

<sup>165</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 11 March 1958.

<sup>166</sup> Quoted in Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta, 'Introduction', in J. Bagchi and S. Dasgupta, eds., *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, Kolkata, Stree, 2003, 1.

<sup>167</sup> This has been observed by Sarbani Banerjee, 'Different Identity Formations in Bengal Partition Narratives by Dalit Refugees', *Interventions*, 19:4, 550–65, specially 558–59; in her fieldwork, Uditi Sen also observed that the Namasudra refugees in Andaman were not nostalgically locked in memories of their homeland in East Pakistan. In our oral history interviews too, we have noticed that the refugees mentioned the names of their ancestral villages only when specifically asked.

<sup>168</sup> Jogendranath Roy, 'Cooper's *Campe chelebela*' (Childhood in Cooper's Camp), in Madhumoy Pal, ed., *Desh Bhag: Binash o Binirman (Partition: Destruction and Deconstruction)*, Kolkata, Gangchil, 2011, 153.

### Camps

The Partition ‘refugees’ in India—referred to in official records as ‘Displaced Persons’ (DPs)—never represented a homogenous category. United in shared pain of displacement, they were differentiated by the heterogeneity of experiences of rehabilitation. And here caste, class, and the associated values of social and cultural capital played a large part. The state played an active role in devising a system of differential treatment. On 29 November 1956, in a speech broadcasted through the Calcutta station of the All India Radio, the then Rehabilitation Minister in the Government of West Bengal, Renuka Ray spelt it out in no uncertain words. Unlike Punjab, the flow of refugees to West Bengal, she mentioned, was ‘a continuous one ever since partition’. In ‘West Bengal every refugee is an additional number to the existing population’. They ‘come to this state with an overburdened economy where the density of population is practically the highest in India’. She cited a July 1955 Statistical Survey Report, which suggested that every thousand migrants coming to West Bengal adversely affected the economy by about Rs. 290,000. But of course, not all refugees were considered burden: ‘the large numbers of d.ps (displaced persons) who have come in earlier years are an *asset* in many ways’ (italics added). They found land and homestead on their own and tried to ‘use their own initiative without becoming *burden* on government’ (italics added). Their rehabilitation therefore had to be prioritised by the state, although large amounts of money were being spent on camp refugees who arrived later.<sup>1</sup> In a letter to Ray in 1960, the Union Finance Minister Morarji Desai made this governmental preference more explicit: ‘... in the years 1955 and 1956 the majority of migrants came from lower middle and agriculturist classes who mostly went to camps. In the years 1949 and 1950, the majority of migrants belonged to upper middle and middle classes who had friends and relations or places of residence in West Bengal and hence could make their own arrangements for stay in West Bengal.’<sup>2</sup> Ray and Desai did not mention caste, but that was implicit in their reference to class and social capital; class and caste in this context were to a large extent overlapping categories.



This governmental discourse making a distinction between the pre- and post-1950 migrants—or between middle class and non-middle class migrants—was reflected in the experiences of peasant refugees, primarily belonging to the SCs, whose experience was certainly qualitatively different from those of the earlier *bhadralok* refugees, who settled themselves in about 150 unauthorised squatter colonies in and around Calcutta through their own initiative.<sup>3</sup> In a speech on 7 August 1955, Renuka Ray assured these preferred migrants that all their squatter colonies set up before December 1950 would be regularised on a priority basis. And further civic development of these colonies would be undertaken by the government.<sup>4</sup> It does not mean that these promises were fully kept; although their colonies were legalised, many of them did not get their deeds of ownership until the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> Yet, their predicament was much less than the harassment faced by the Dalit peasant refugees who arrived later.

These distinctions and preferences between the two cohorts of refugees were reflected in the literary stereotypes as well, as middle-class refugees' efforts at self-rehabilitation made them look like pioneers, while the lower-class peasant refugees remained caught in a discourse of victimhood.<sup>6</sup> If the state's attitude to the refugees was hostile from the very beginning of post-Partition migration in 1947–48,<sup>7</sup> it became even more negative when the Dalit peasants began to cross the border in thousands, on foot or by boat, with no money, with little professional skill, and no social linkages, and therefore mostly expecting state support. The self-rehabilitating refugees of the first wave became 'assets', while the more recent peasant refugees were considered to be 'burden' and received only minimal support and sympathy from the Indian state, which, in the name of rehabilitation, eventually dispersed them all over India.

As the government initially assumed that the post-1950 migration was temporary and reversible (see [Chapter 2](#)), its policy was more geared towards relief rather than rehabilitation. The refugees were segregated from the resident population and as far as possible they were intercepted at the point of entry—at certain transit points like Banpur, Petrapole, Hasnabad, from where they were taken to the Sealdah station in Calcutta for registration. There were also interception centres in the bordering districts of north Bengal, like Malda, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Raigunj, and Alipurduar.<sup>8</sup> After the introduction of passports in 1952, only those with legitimate 'migration certificates' were accepted as refugees.<sup>9</sup> However, in 1956, it was revealed that about 25,000 people from East Pakistan had entered India with 'forged migration certificates'. In the end, the government recognised them as legitimate refugees because it was possibly realised that the migrants desperate to leave East Pakistan

had to travel with forged documents more because of the corruption ring at the Indian High Commission in Dacca.<sup>10</sup>

The refugee entry points were the spaces where some old colonial notions of social ordering were at play. At the registration desks at Sealdah station, their papers were checked, they were asked about their identity, given a registration card, and sent by train or by road to a refugee camp. It was at these registration desks that their identity as Namasudra cultivator was indelibly inscribed on their cards—no matter what their real occupation or qualifications were.<sup>11</sup> They were then categorised according to the level of social or financial capital they brought with them. It was reported that the registration desks issued three coloured cards. White cards were for those who had nothing and preferred to take shelter in the refugee camps set up by the government. Blue cards were for those who only needed initial assistance but were capable of self-rehabilitation. And the red cards were for those who were able to take care of themselves and were not willing to go to the camps at all. As expected, the majority of the white card holders were Namasudra or other Dalit peasants who would be sent to a camp.<sup>12</sup> Since 1950, the government maintained several types of such refugee camps, which we will discuss later in this section.

After their interrogation at the Sealdah station, the refugees would be sent to one of the transit or relief camps scattered in different districts like 24-Parganas, Nadia, Bardhaman, Medinipur, Bankura, or Cooch Behar. At these camps, there would be no work facilities for the refugees. They would be given shelter, a modest cash dole—which was Rs. 12 per adult and Rs. 8 per non-adult per month—and some fortnightly ration. This was certainly not enough for subsistence, and so many refugees tried to make some extra income through ingenious entrepreneurial efforts. Some opened tea shops, others engaged in petty trade; women rolled *bidis* (cheap cigarettes made of unprocessed tobacco), prepared paper packets, sold cow dung cakes, or worked as maidservants.<sup>13</sup> Sometimes they also manipulated the system by evading rules or concealing information. The government subsequently opened thirty-two worksite camps across the province, where various kinds of developmental activities were undertaken to keep the able-bodied refugees engaged in gainful employment. The refugees were employed in those works to earn a living and were promised rehabilitation around the area. The Bagjola and Sonarpur worksite camps in the district of 24-Parganas are examples of such camps.

The government also ran a few women's camps for women and children who had no male relatives or family to support them. Bhadrakali and Bansberia women's camps in Hooghly district,

Ranaghat Women's Home in Nadia district were such women's camps. The fourth type was the Permanent Liability (PL) camps for those refugees who were considered unfit for any kind of gainful employment, being mainly old, infirm, disabled persons, and orphans. These PL camps were located in Dudhkundi in Medinipur district, Bansberia in Hooghly, Chandmari, Coopers camp (partially), Chamta, and Dhubulia in Nadia district, Habra, Ashoknagar, and Titagarh in the 24-Parganas. There were also several colony camps, which were established on sites where all its inmates were to be eventually rehabilitated. Each family received five *kathas* (1 katha = 3600 square feet) of homestead land, a home loan of Rs. 500, and a business loan of Rs. 500.<sup>14</sup> The existence of such camps was justified only for the time normally required for the distribution of land, loans, etc., and erection of houses. A period of three months was usually enough for the purpose, and therefore, a colony camp would not ordinarily last for more than that period.<sup>15</sup> In other camps, particularly in numerous transit and worksite camps, the refugees spent not just months but years, facing an uncertain future amidst living conditions that not only challenged their social identity and relationships but also outraged their human dignity.

**Table 3.1** District-wise Distribution of Camps and Refugees, 1957

District	Refugees
Nadia	62,797
24-Parganas	49,541
Bardhaman	46,346
Hooghly	23,182
Howrah	9,636
Bankura	12,753
Birbhum	21,984
Murshidabad	14,184
Medinipur	18,386
West Dinajpur	1,056
Cooch Behar	1,425
Calcutta	6,744
<b>Total</b>	<b>268,740</b>

Source: Relief and Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons in West Bengal Report, Calcutta, Home (Publications) Department, Government of West Bengal, 1957.

It is difficult to understand and explain a refugee camp, which was certainly not a normal space that the ordinary citizens of a nation-state would call home. It was not a new phenomenon in world history either. Such camps were coming up in Europe since the dissolution of the old empires after World War I. For understanding life in the camps and their historical significance, scholars often refer to Giorgio Agamben, who has described such camps as 'spaces of exception'—'a

piece of land placed outside the normal juridical order'—where the sovereign power temporarily suspends the rule of law and the refugees, denied of all civic political rights, are reduced to 'bare life'. In such a situation, 'no act committed against them could appear any longer as a crime'.<sup>16</sup> His formulation was based on the assumption that the refugee represented 'a disquieting element' to the modern nation-state system, which had made the concept of universal human rights subservient to the rights of citizens. And 'nativity' became the defining principle of citizenship of a nation placed in the 'trinity of state/nation/territory'.<sup>17</sup> Hence, the refugees were to be enclosed and segregated, as they remained in the nation-state as exceptions. And then a decision had to be made whether they would be naturalised/rehabilitated or repatriated.

The limitations of Agamben's model have now been discussed by many scholars.<sup>18</sup> It is particularly difficult to apply this model to explain the condition of the refugee camps in post-Partition India, which was different from that of their early twentieth-century European counterparts. While the refugee camps in Europe in the early days of nation-states came in tandem with the 'laws on denationalization',<sup>19</sup> the post-Partition refugees in India had a natural claim to Indian citizenship. The refugees 'must be made proper citizens of India', Nehru told the Constituent Assembly.<sup>20</sup> The Article 6 of the Indian Constitution recognised that right, and the subsequent Citizenship Act of 1955 did not override that constitutional provision.<sup>21</sup> Although for the post-1950 refugees, the GI tried the option of repatriation by persuasion, it soon realised that it was unworkable. Even though a bureaucratic state and its paperwork regimes made life difficult for the refugees,<sup>22</sup> the sovereign power could not strip them of all their civic political rights. In a new democracy, the opposition parties kept a vigilant eye on their conditions, as they saw in these refugees their future voters. The refugees could not be entirely quarantined from outside political influences, as the fences of the camps remained porous. And finally, the refugees showed a considerable degree of agency by contesting and resisting state policies of relief and rehabilitation. For them, the claim to rehabilitation emanated from a perception of right as a citizen, rather than any expectation of kindness and generosity.

For understanding the post-Partition refugee camps in West Bengal, possibly more helpful are the insights derived from the rich literature on post-war Palestinian refugee camps. These are described by Adam Ramadan as 'complex' spaces produced through relations between and practices of individuals, families, groups, institutions, and organisations. The refugee camps were, first of all, 'spaces of hospitality', where the refugees were given humanitarian aid to

provide them with temporary shelter until a more permanent rehabilitation arrangement was made. But the camps were also 'spaces of identity formation and preservation', 'spaces of insecurity and violence', 'spaces of discipline and governmentality', and finally, 'spaces of dissent and contestation'. The camp society was an assemblage of diverse groups and identities, locked in a set of unequal relations of power. And this community was never completely insulated, but rather was in constant interaction with the outside political actors.<sup>23</sup> If we look at the refugee camps in West Bengal in the 1950s, all these features will be clearly visible in their structures and in the quotidian lived experiences of its inmates; there was significant ontological overlap between these analytical categories. There were also aspects of life in these refugee camps, which were in many ways unique and without international parallels. We will try to reconstruct below a pen picture of everyday life in the refugee camps.<sup>24</sup>

## **Hospitality and Insecurity**

The refugee camps in West Bengal were certainly spaces of hospitality, but the question is, what kind of hospitality did the Indian state offer to the post-1950 refugees? The GI did not sign the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and therefore, had no statutory obligation to provide sufficient hygiene and sanitation facilities in the refugee camps. Nor was sufficient physical space readily available to provide even temporary accommodation for this unending stream of refugees. And allocation of resources was also less than generous, in sharp contrast to the situation in north India. So, the hospitality that was grudgingly offered was the bare minimum. And in those conditions, as a 1958 survey revealed, one-third of the inmates of the camps in West Bengal spent from six to ten years of their lives. Even that degrading life was never stable, as the state kept them in perpetual transit mode, constantly transferring them from one camp to the other, depending on the changing conditions of their health or family situations.<sup>25</sup>

Cooper's camp was one of the larger camps in West Bengal. It was started on 11 March 1950 on a 6.5 square kilometre area. It was meant to accommodate 40,000 refugees, but by May its population had grown to over 300,000.<sup>26</sup> Later, in an average month, it housed up to 70,000 refugees, who were provided with shelter in about 100 large iron-framed tin-roofed warehouses built for Allied soldiers during World War II. Added to these were many temporarily constructed wooden framed tin-roofed huts and hundreds of tents. Jogendranath Roy, one of its inmates, tells us that each of the large warehouses would be allocated to fifteen to twenty-five families; a

room about fifty feet long would accommodate four to five families.<sup>27</sup> Ratish Mullick, another resident of the camp, told Abhijit Dasgupta that these rooms were indeed more overcrowded: 'In each godown nearly 40 to 100 families lived.'<sup>28</sup> On 16 June 1956, Gour Kundu wrote an article in *Swadhinata* with the title 'Cooper's camp refugee shelter or concentration camp?'. In it, he described in graphic details the living conditions in this camp, which housed at that time about 30,000 refugees. In his description, each of the warehouses accommodated sixty families or about 300 individuals; 'each family got five square feet of space', which they demarcated with their tin suitcases.<sup>29</sup> It was possible that this measurement of 'five square feet' per family was an exaggeration. From an old photograph of conditions in one such room in Cooper's camp we get the impression that the space that each family got was at least 5ft x 6ft or 30 square feet. Nilanjana Chatterjee calculates that a hutment about forty by ten feet would accommodate four to five families, which would mean at least eighty square feet per family.<sup>30</sup>

The situation was more crammed in Shiromonipur camp in Bankura, described by Manoranjan Byapari. Here hundreds of brown tents were erected, and families of five to eight members were huddled into a space of about forty-eight square feet.<sup>31</sup> At Kunti camp in Hooghly, described by Jatin Bala, each family was given a tent made of yellow thick cloth coated with wax. The space approximately was eighty-one square feet, which accommodated five to ten members of a family.<sup>32</sup> The wax coating would make the tent extremely hot in summer; the coating often got melted in the sweltering heat, making holes through which water would pour freely in monsoon. This was the space where a family was meant to live, sleep, eat, and in monsoon even cook. In these conditions lived about 5,000 refugees of the Kunti camp.<sup>33</sup>

Even this scarce space was not secured space, as often storms and floods would result in these tents being swept away, with refugees being moved to temporary shelters. In Kunti camp there was a big fire, which burnt down about a hundred tents and no alternative shelter could be provided immediately.<sup>34</sup> Such disasters struck quite often, leaving vulnerable refugees even more defenceless, as the state remained apathetic. In April 1952, when a storm destroyed 300 huts in Cooper's camp, more than 200 inmates of the camp, under the leadership of Jyotish Mukerjee and Bimal Biswas (a Brahman and a Namasudra), travelled by train without ticket to Calcutta to communicate their grievances to the Chief Minister and Relief Commissioner. They were arrested at Sealdah station and sent back to Cooper's, while their leaders were prosecuted and convicted.<sup>35</sup> In May 1952, a cyclone destroyed 300 huts in Dhubulia camp, causing one

death, and rendering 800 people homeless (see the section on Dissent and Contestation for more details). In 1956, the Ashrafabad transit camp was flooded, forcing about 1,700 families to seek shelter in nearby refugee colony in Habra. The Superintendent refused to pay them their doles, unless they returned to their camp, even though it was still utterly uninhabitable. This led to peaceful resistance by the camp inmates, including limited hunger strike, demanding proper rehabilitation and immediate improvement of physical facilities in the camp.<sup>36</sup> In June 1958, there was a devastating cyclone in Bengal, which wrecked some of the refugee camps and colonies, their residents only had private charity to depend on.<sup>37</sup>

The other prominent feature of camp life was the extreme scarcity of sanitation facilities and water supply, which were provided at a bare minimum level. The largest camp in West Bengal was the Dhubulia camp in Nadia. Constructed in an abandoned American aerodrome, divided into twenty-five wards, it was meant to have 5,000 hutments, 500 tube-wells, to accommodate up to 100,000 refugees.<sup>38</sup> But other camps were relatively less equipped. In Cooper's camp eighty toilets served a population of 70,000; the situation was similar in Shiromonipur. Most of the people there defecated in the open, preferably before sunrise. In Jirat, the latrines were constructed so close to the pond nearby that monsoon floods would often wash the faeces into the pond contaminating the water.<sup>39</sup>

As for regular water supply, in most camps only a few hand tube-wells served as the only sources of water for drinking, cooking, and washing. At Khumru camp in Debra Police Station in Medinipur district, for twenty-eight families only one tube-well was dug; it used to have no water in the dry months between mid-February and mid-June.<sup>40</sup> In Cooper's camp twenty tube-wells were dug for 70,000 people; and only two in Shiromonipur serviced 5,000.<sup>41</sup> Two wells served a camp population of 2,000 in Ratibati camp near Asansol, where sanitation arrangements were practically non-existent.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, refugee women and men—irrespective of age and caste—spent long hours in queues for water, where various forms of regional, linguistic, kinship and family ties, loyalties and feuds were played out in various forms of combative, competitive, and sometimes dramatic encounters.<sup>43</sup>

The refugee camps were also extremely unhealthy spaces—almost a twilight zone between life and death. Insufficient sanitary latrines, inadequate sewage and unsatisfactory supply of pure water led to outbreak of diseases; and death continued to be a great leveller. On 29 March 1956, *Swadhinata* carried a report on Cooper's camp, which described its sanitation and health conditions in the following words:



For a long time, the toilets in the camp have broken down—they are full of faeces. There are no arrangements for the regular cleaning of drains. The air in the camp has been poisoned by the foul smell arising from accumulated garbage on the roadsides. Mosquitoes have made life unbearable. Many families have been afflicted by malarial fever. In the new tents chicken pox has arrived as well. There has been a hike in the incidents of cholera. Death rate has increased. ... There is almost no arrangement for treatment.<sup>44</sup>

But according to official records, the refugee camps were meant to have adequate medical facilities like hospitals and qualified doctors. Renuka Ray, the Minister for Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation told the members of the Legislative Assembly in 1955 that for all diseases preventive vaccination was given to all camp refugees. There was 'a provision in every camp for a hospital' with the capacity of 'one bed per every thousand inmates'. In addition, Dhubulia and Chandmari camps had two hospitals for tuberculosis (TB) patients with a total capacity of 150 beds.<sup>45</sup> Even then, in 1960 the 'refugees form(ed) the largest number of tubercular patients' in the province.<sup>46</sup> In the camps people died in hordes because medicines and other equipment were in short supply in their medical centres and hospitals. As Manoranjan Byapari writes:

As far as medicines went, he [the doctor] had two kinds of liquid—one white and the other red. Beginning with cold, fever, headache, stomach ache, dysentery to typhoid, tuberculosis, cholera and jaundice, every disease would be prescribed the white liquid diluted in water, to be taken thrice daily and for cuts, bruises, burns, was the red medicine, to be taken twice daily.<sup>47</sup>

The condition in the smaller camps was even more desperate. The Khumra camp was visited twice a week by a mobile medical unit. But the allegation was, when the doctor came on the round, he had no provision of medicines, except a bottle of 'Dettol'.<sup>48</sup>

So, people died despite the camp medical facilities. In June–July of 1952 in Dhubulia camp, 2,357 people were treated for various ailments, but out of them, 631 died.<sup>49</sup> In Jogeshwar Dihi transit camp in Bardhaman a 'peculiar fever' broke out. After the death of two babies and an old man, a doctor finally came to visit, but he appeared to be a quack. His 'white pills and red tonic' failed to prevent further deaths.<sup>50</sup> In 1956, in Kurmitola camp in Murshidabad district, out of 5,458 inmates, 143 people died in six months out of hunger and diseases.<sup>51</sup> Poor quality of rations, particularly supply of rotten rice, often resulted in dysentery causing death for children. Child mortality was particularly high in the refugee camps, and this increased when such catastrophes as smallpox and cholera epidemics struck. When such calamities happened, trucks would arrive at the camps at dead of

night and remove the corpses, with no record of the deceased apparently ever kept.<sup>52</sup>

‘So, the patients died. They died with the assurance that they were not dying without treatment’, writes Byapari, who had almost died at Shiromonipur camp.<sup>53</sup> It was pointed out in the Legislative Assembly in April 1960 that out of the 240,000 refugees that the central Rehabilitation department had undertaken to rehabilitate, cases resolved under the heading of ‘Liquidation through death and discharge’ numbered 26,841 in 1957, 13,600 in 1958, and 19,000 in 1959. Since the normal annual death rate in the state was 12 percent, this figure should not have been more than 2,500 per year.<sup>54</sup> Even if these figures were somewhat inflated by the opposition politicians (the figures were not contested by the government), there was no reason to doubt that the refugees were dying in large numbers under the care of the Indian state.

Often deaths were not reported for fear of losing doles, particularly when a child died.<sup>55</sup> As Hironprava Das of Cooper’s camp put it, ‘many children died of dysentery in camps. Dead bodies of children were sometimes buried, but very often were simply thrown away in the jungle for paucity of funds. The government used to pay only Rs. 16 for the cremation of a body.’<sup>56</sup> Nilanjana Chatterjee has argued that this ‘abandonment of the dead’ was the ultimate act of violation of human dignity.<sup>57</sup> We will frame it in a slightly different way. In a situation where death had become quotidian, life was precious and special. So, if by abandoning the dead even meagre resources could be saved for the living, that was the most rational choice for a group of people striving to survive in those spaces of extreme insecurity of life. It was therefore the penny-pinching attitude of a heartless state that was responsible for inflicting this ultimate insult to human dignity.

To put it in perspective, these conditions in West Bengal camps in the 1950s could be compared with those in the north Indian camps in 1948. In the Kurukshetra camp, the largest of its kind in the region, ‘there were 14 dispensaries and 3 hospitals, more than 81 medical practitioners, including 17 nurses and midwives, and 22 nursing orderlies; the total strength of medical staff was over 1000.’ The camps in Punjab were served by twenty-eight medical officers and by the end of March 1948 their residents had access to twenty-eight hospitals. The medical stores were well stocked, particularly when it came to vaccines, and as a result, there was no outbreak of epidemic.<sup>58</sup> The comparison raises serious questions about the differential treatment that the East Bengali refugees received. As Pran Krishna Chakrabarti, a refugee leader, observed in an interview in 1976, for 6 million refugees from East Bengal the GI spent 720 million rupees, while for 4.7 million refugees in Punjab it spent 4,560 million.

‘In this way partial treatment was meted out to the East Bengal refugees.’<sup>59</sup>

However, if morbidity and mortality were the features of everyday life in West Bengal refugee camps, there were also rays of hope. One positive aspect of camp life was the school for children, giving young boys and girls belonging to Dalit peasant families a chance to be educated. Not every camp had such a school, and often these were not well-equipped. ‘A chalk and two books were our educational equipment. There were only two teachers for three hundred students’—recalls Jatin Bala about his school in Kunti camp.<sup>60</sup> Often teachers were appointed from among the residents. Sukhchand Mondal who was a schoolteacher in his previous life got the teacher’s job in Jogeshwar Dihi transit camp and received a salary of seventy rupees. As for equipment, he had a stool to sit on and a blackboard.<sup>61</sup> In some camps schools were established by the refugees themselves through their own autonomous initiative, as in the Bagiola camp. Sometimes refugee children also went to schools outside their camps.<sup>62</sup>

The schools gave the refugee kids something of a childhood, which some of them fondly remembered throughout their lives, like Jatin Bala and Jogendranath Roy. But there were others like Byapari, who missed out on this small window of opportunity, as these schools were closed when the government decided to shut down all camps on 31 July 1959.<sup>63</sup> When the cash doles were stopped and refugees were asked to move to other states, the meagre student scholarships given to students in camps studying at secondary level were also discontinued and this led to nearly 80 percent of such refugee students withdrawing from schools.<sup>64</sup> Going to school once again became for these children an aspirational dream. Large camps like Cooper’s camp had other facilities too, like a post office, a police post and a railway platform where trains filled with refugees came straight from Sealdah station.

It will be pertinent here to mention that the conditions were not that dire in camps where ‘middle class and lower middle class’ refugees were accommodated. These camps deliberately excluded Dalit peasant refugees. According to one account, the Gayeshpur camp was constructed for such refugees in an abandoned American army base near Kanchrapara station, about 35 miles off Calcutta. Here 8,000 huts were constructed to accommodate 20,000 refugees. The planning included establishment of two markets, one higher English and thirteen primary schools, public latrines and one tube-well per forty families. The problem here was of a different nature. Although accommodation was provided for so many families, there were no opportunities for gainful employment. So, as *Jugantar* staff reporter

predicted, this was a project waiting to fail.<sup>65</sup>

But then lack of opportunities for gainful employment was also a problem in camps that primarily housed Dalit peasant refugees, as these were fenced spaces segregating the inmates from the local people who were deeply suspicious of this migrant population.<sup>66</sup> Jatin Bala narrates his experience of looking for work as an agricultural day labourer at the nearby village during the harvest season. He was verbally abused for being a migrant, a *bangal* (an East Bengali) and a low caste; he was exploited as a child labourer, and finally, defrauded by his employer.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, apart from a few enterprising people opening small shops of daily necessities or tea stalls within the camps, most of the residents did not venture out very often to seek employment until their doles were stopped. Bounded in fenced compounds of transit or relief camps, these peasant refugees spent months and sometimes years in imposed idleness, just ‘endlessly playing cards’ or gossiping at tea shops.<sup>68</sup> They earned in the process the dubious reputation of being indolent Bengali refugees who lacked in energy and entrepreneurship.<sup>69</sup> The prevalent literary stereotypes presented the camp refugees as a ‘class of perpetual professional legalized beggars’ who preferred to take doles rather than accept paid employment, camp life thus destroying their sense of dignity and human values.<sup>70</sup>

When the government abruptly decided to close the camps on 31 July 1959 (see [Chapter 4](#) for reasons)—and this meant the state withdrawing all kinds of support for the refugees—the latter were left with the possibility to fend for themselves without any social or financial capital whatsoever to fall back upon. The State Rehabilitation Minister Prafulla Chandra Sen told the Assembly in December 1959 that the camps were not actually closed, as skeleton services were continued, and later even doles were restored.<sup>71</sup> But initially the closure put the refugees in enormous pain. In their autobiographies both Manoranjan Byapari and Jatin Bala have written in uncomfortable details about the suffering and distress it caused to the refugee families. At that point of time ‘we truly became refugees—refused by all’, said one of our interviewees from Sonarpur worksite camp.<sup>72</sup>

## Re-negotiating Identity

The other important feature of refugee camps was that in these enclosed spaces, gender, caste, regional, and other social identities were being constantly re-negotiated and re-configured. The scarcity of space forced the refugees to live a shared commune life—sleeping in large open living areas, sharing common cooking spots and toilets,

and standing in long queues for water, dole, and ration. These conditions were not conducive to maintaining social distinctions of gender and caste. ‘There was no privacy’, observed Gauranga Das, a resident of the Cooper’s camp in the mid-1950s.<sup>73</sup> In the big rooms each family would demarcate its own allocated space with such markers as broken bricks or stones and would hang saris and other pieces of cloth to have a modicum of privacy. As Sarajubala Ghot of Ranaghat Women’s Home near Cooper’s camp explained:

In the dormitories of those barracks each refugee family was allotted a small space. Each family marked its occupied area with pebbles, stones and tit-bits and sometimes did not even have sleeping space for all the members of the family. So far as the tent was concerned, each refugee family comprising four members got one tent, a bigger family (with more than four members) got two tents to live in. Under such circumstances, there was absolutely no question of any privacy.<sup>74</sup>

As Gaur Kundu wrote of Cooper’s camp, in that crammed space of ‘five square feet’ lived the whole family: ‘father-mother, son-daughter-in-law, brother-sister—all lived together. It was in that space took place their cooking, their eating, their births and deaths, marriages and pujas—everything.’<sup>75</sup>

Women in the camps had to do all the tasks for maintaining life processes—cooking, washing, collecting water, and looking after the children. This freed men for doing other things or doing nothing, as described earlier. This male idleness, as Nilanjana Chatterjee has argued, also led to ‘moral decadence’—as camp life was marred by endless fighting and squabbles over trifles; ‘gambling, drinking, wife-beating, extra and premarital relationships’ became regular features of this quotidian demeaning existence.<sup>76</sup> Within these conditions evolved new codes of gender relations that posed new challenges and insecurities for women. As Maya Saha of Dhubulia camp observed: ‘Growing up in the traditional Hindu families as young girls, we never had the privilege of socialising with any male from outside our own families. Becoming a refugee, we had to adjust ourselves to that changed situation.’<sup>77</sup> In that radically altered social space, where literally nothing was private or secret, where there was no wall to separate the home from the world, the refugee women had to negotiate new norms of gender relations, which often transgressed the established moral codes or at least pushed the boundaries. For conservative males this would engender moral anxiety, as evident in the testimony of Jyotirmoy Mondal, who described life in the camp in Bardhaman district, where his family was initially accommodated, in the following words:

Jogeshwar Dihi transit camp is a mini sea of humanity—people live and die

here, couples mate, marriages break, widows find solace in the willing arms of married men. ... Nothing is too personal or too sacred for this herd of border-crossers.<sup>78</sup>

It sounded like a complete breakdown of the old moral order! For many women refugees, that experience was extremely challenging, degrading and dehumanising. Kamala Saha thus spoke of the situation:

Life in camp made us less than human. We had no privacy—perfect strangers, men, sat across the hall and stared shamelessly at young women like us. They bothered us at the water pump. At first the girls didn't reply. But soon enough all this mixing, this living on top of each other, led to all sorts of dirty behaviour. The children learned evil ways, marriages broke up, unmarried women delivered babies and abandoned them, others went off to sell themselves. We lived like animals without shame.<sup>79</sup>

That condition of 'living like animal' led to resistance with a dexterity that was unprecedented—passivity and vulnerability were replaced by a desperate effort to recover agency to survive in an extremely adversarial situation. And this agency became even more visible when many of these women began to take leadership in the protest movements against camp maladministration, which we will describe in the following section on Dissent and Contestation. We may only mention here that the conservative *bhadralok* society outside the camps remained merciless in its moral censure of these women, who were learning to stand for themselves. Rumours abounded of a high rate of secret abortions in Cooper's camp or Pallisree camp and of the undesirable spread of venereal diseases. The scandalised Bengali *bhadralok* listened to such stories in disapprobation as well as in perverse amusement, as rumours even reverberated in the Legislative Assembly chamber.<sup>80</sup> Contemporary Partition literature mentions rampant women trafficking, sexual abuses, and the oldest trade being regular features of camp life.<sup>81</sup> While much of this stereotyping was the product of a pervasive social hatred for the lower caste refugees, it can hardly be denied that the refugee camps were spaces of insecurity and violence for the most vulnerable section of the refugee community, the women, although that violence was often invisible, systemic, and inward-bound.

If the camp situation was not conducive to maintaining conventional sexual morality or gender codes, it was even more difficult for practising caste distinction and discipline. Caste apparently had no place in camp life, which seemingly had democratised poverty and suffering in strange ways. Literary depictions of camp life eloquently speak of its levelling effects, as Debjani Sengupta has argued: 'The eradication of caste lines is just one

of the significant instances of social transformation wrought by the partition. The camp is an equalizer; everybody is a refugee here.’<sup>82</sup> This sounds like Agamben’s argument that a refugee camp is a ‘quintessential zone of indistinction’.<sup>83</sup> But in reality, all refugees were not the same; caste did matter in the camps.

Caste was always taken into consideration by the state in its dealings with the refugees, particularly when it came to the allocation of living spaces. For West Punjabi Dalit refugees, separate colonies were built in the outskirts of cities like Delhi and Jalandhar.<sup>84</sup> In West Bengal, caste was certainly taken into consideration in allocating space within the camps. In most cases, refugees would prefer to go to the camp where they knew they would find their relatives, village acquaintances, or community members who had migrated earlier.<sup>85</sup> As a result, each camp developed its own specific community demographic—in certain camps like Cooper’s camp or Dhubulia camp in Nadia or Bagjola camp in the 24-Parganas, the Namasudras constituted more than 70 percent of the inmates. So, the few upper-caste Hindu refugees who came to live in these camps preferred to stay in separate rooms, and these preferences were respected by camp authorities.<sup>86</sup> This is not to suggest that some form of caste segregation was surreptitiously maintained in the camps; however, this is to indicate that caste mattered in governance and everyday social relations, even in extreme situations of privation, despite the currency of a discourse of levelling effects of victimhood, bringing all those displaced and destitute people into a new collective identity called the ‘refugees’.

In this connection, we should also mention the case of the Jirat rehabilitation colony, which the government setup in September 1950 to permanently resettle 500 refugee families who came from East Bengal after the riot of 1950. These families belonged to all sorts of castes, from Brahmans to SCs. When plots of homestead land were distributed, people preferred to stay near those from their own ancestral districts in East Bengal. Regional and linguistic affinity seemed to be more important considerations for spatial relocation. There was no preference expressed for caste-based settlement. This colony was surveyed in 1954 by the Anthropology Department of the GI. Its report revealed that only about 10 per cent of the refugees in the Jirat colony were ‘hostile’ to inter-caste interaction; the rest were more open about keeping social relations with other castes, including the SCs. However, when it came to the fundamentals of the caste system, like endogamy, all the marriages that took place in the colony were within the same caste—‘so caste prejudice was still in existence’, the survey report concluded.<sup>87</sup>

Thus, the camps were spaces where in strange ways old identities



were not destroyed, but altered and preserved. Caste also acted positively in boosting the self-confidence and mental strength of the camp refugees. As an overwhelming majority of them were Namasudras, their collective memory of a historic caste protest movement beginning in the late nineteenth century worked to enhance their solidarity and gave them strength to overcome hard days. The majority of them belonged to the heterodox religious sect called Matua, which was at the root of the Namasudra caste movement. P.R. Thakur, the guru of the Matua Mahasangha (MM), visited the camps from time to time. Their ritual of evening *kirtan* or congregational singing of devotional songs was a regular feature of camp life, and gave these refugees solace and a feeling of the normalcy of home. Above all, it gave them the confidence to confront an environment of extreme uncertainty and stress.<sup>88</sup> But if old identities still worked, new identities were also being forged, as in a community of suffering barriers of status mattered less.

As we shall see in the following section on Dissent and Contestation, it was through the protest movements against camp maladministration and later against the rehabilitation and dispersal policies of the state that a new caste-neutral 'refugee' identity was also being shaped and articulated. A refugee activist in Cooper's camp in his recollection of those days of struggle sought to privilege a generalised refugee identity over caste: 'the Namasudra or the other lower caste people participated in this movement to fulfil their demands not as lower caste community members but as refugees'.<sup>89</sup> At a group meeting with the former residents of the Bagjola camp, the participants vehemently asserted that caste did not matter in their movement—they were fighting as a united front for all refugees.<sup>90</sup> A frequently used slogan in the refugee demonstrations of this period, '*Amra kara? Bastuhara*' (Who are we? Refugees) was a powerful statement that privileged their refugee identity over their caste.<sup>91</sup>

## Dissent and Contestation

Some features of camp life in West Bengal, such as overcrowding, lack of privacy, and dehumanisation, were by no means unique. In camps across the world, the internees lived in similar life conditions that were unlike the normal living conditions of citizens outside the camps.<sup>92</sup> In such spaces, as Gerogio Agamben theorised, 'whether or not atrocities are committed depends not on law but on the civility and ethical sense of the police who temporarily act as sovereign . ...'<sup>93</sup> But in post-Partition West Bengal, the camps did not turn into such 'spaces of exception' because the refugees did not merely die or suffer passively without resistance, and those recurrent acts of defiance

restrained the atrocities of the camp officials. These camps were therefore also spaces of dissent and contestation. Despite the adverse conditions of their quotidian existence, the refugees showed remarkable signs of agency and constantly challenged the authoritarian tendencies of the local representatives of the state. This aspect of camp life unsettles the familiar narrative of victimhood.

However, although the rule of law could never be entirely suspended in the refugee camps, these were no doubt highly regulated spaces. As Robert Davidson has noted, 'the very practical notion of management is intrinsic to the existence of the nation-state.'<sup>94</sup> The state tries to manage its national community; and hence the camps were also stringently controlled. As Vazira Zamindar observed, these camps were, from the very beginning, designed as 'supervisable spaces' and were subjected to 'modern disciplinary imperatives'.<sup>95</sup> In this regulatory setting, the relationship between the benefactor (state) and the beneficiary (refugee) was administered by a posse of camp officials, whose behaviour towards the refugees always reflected the unequal balance of power inherent in this relationship.

Each camp was divided into wards, each under a superintendent, and the whole camp was left in charge of a Commandant, who was usually an ex-service man.<sup>96</sup> These low-level functionaries of the state were in most cases middle-class *bhadralok*, often Brahmans, who came to the camps with their inherited prejudices of caste and patriarchy. They often displayed their attitude of condescending paternalistic benevolence, fully internalising the official discourse that these refugees were an unwanted 'burden' on the state. If female superintendents in the women's camps were little sympathetic, the male officials betrayed their patriarchal authoritarianism, ready to enforce discipline in the camps by categorizing, separating, and controlling the refugees.<sup>97</sup> And as we shall see later in this section, when they failed to control, they used ruthless repressive measures to silence the refugee voices of dissent. There were definitely exceptions, but refugee testimonies offer a rather bleak portrayal of the camp officials.<sup>98</sup>

Joya Chatterji has shown how between 1947 and 1950, the official mindset towards relief and rehabilitation was shaped by a discourse of 'charity', with the state becoming the benevolent benefactor. Embedded in this discourse was a scepticism about giving charity to male able-bodied refugees, who were expected to earn a living for themselves and support their families.<sup>99</sup> The camp officials treated the refugees with contempt and disdain, and often as 'potential criminals' out to defraud the system.<sup>100</sup> The day-to-day encounter that the refugees had with these often corrupt and always arrogant officials of the camps was therefore of an adversarial nature and this gradually

led to resistance.

But most importantly, resistance arose in the camps because the refugees looked at relief and rehabilitation, not as a charity that the state was offering out of compassion, and they as recipients had to remain grateful for. They looked at it as a matter of 'right'.<sup>101</sup> And their right to refuge was premised on a claim to citizenship of the nation-state. Particularly for the Dalit refugees, such a claim emanated from a notion of compact they believed they had with the founders of the Indian nation-state who had promised to take care of their rehabilitation if they were forced to migrate due to Partition (see [Chapter 1](#)). So, when that promise failed to deliver at the local level, they remonstrated against the failures of the camp administrators. Their protests also highlighted the fact that these camps were not spaces of exclusion; to overcome the extreme imbalances of power in the camps, the refugees sought help from the wider political leadership of the province. Ideas of social justice and inspiration for political protests streamed freely across the fences of the refugee camps and sought to restrain the authoritarianism of the local functionaries of the state.

However, while the camp refugees showed remarkable signs of agency and autonomy, their growing dependence on the *bhadralok* politicians also imposed limits on the intensity and agenda of their protests, and restricted articulation of their social identities. Caste did not figure in this narrative of contestation at this stage, as compulsions of the struggle for rehabilitation imposed on them a language of unity that could bring all residents of the camps to the same barricade lines. This meant the articulation of a new caste-neutral identity of a refugee. But since the barricade lines were mostly populated by Dalit refugees, the caste question remained imbricated in the very structure of their struggle, inextricably entangling their new (refugee) and old (Dalit) identities in the novel circumstances of the camp's political life.

Prangobinda Das, who was once active in refugee resistance in Cooper's camp, recalled with pride:

Initially we used to follow the non-violent methods to make the government aware about our demands for better livelihood. At that time, we used to prefer the method of negotiation with the officers of the RR [Relief and Rehabilitation] Department of the Government as well as method of satyagraha. Of all the camps in West Bengal, we were more organised in the Cooper's and always took a leading part in launching any protest movement. We used to gather on the playground in front of the Kali temple and all movements usually started from this place.<sup>102</sup>

In Cooper's camp, there were also other points of mass contact from where new consciousness developed and new ideas of protest

germinated. Jatin Saha opened a tea shop where every day he kept a copy of *Swadhinata*, the daily newspaper of the Communist Party of India (CPI), for everyone to read. Saha later rose to become the general secretary of the local Bastuhara Samiti (refugee association) and used his tea shop to organise a series of protests.<sup>103</sup>

But it was not just Cooper's camp. From late 1949, camps in all parts of West Bengal were becoming restless as the government planned to close them down. Different political parties became active in the camps and the government considered using the Security Act to contain the unrest.<sup>104</sup> The government later changed that decision about closure, but it was from early 1950 that the refugees in different camps through their own autonomous initiative began to organise themselves into Bastuhara Samitis.<sup>105</sup> This organisation was necessary because even for dealing with the lower functionaries of the state, they had to contend with extreme imbalances of power. The refugees' initial protests at this stage were against camp maladministration, unacceptable quality of ration or high-handedness of the camp administrators.<sup>106</sup>

We can start with a few interesting examples of such camp-level activism and resistance, where autonomous initiatives sought redress to entirely local grievances and where no outside political intervention was involved, except at the very final stages of the movements. In July 1949, about 200 Namasudra refugees of the Dudkundi camp in Jhargram in Medinipur district, frustrated by lack of job opportunities and late payment of cash doles, vented their anger on the Gurkha camp guards, who tried to prevent them from removing doors and windows of unoccupied huts.<sup>107</sup> A few months later in April 1950, unrest erupted in Salbani camp in Medinipur district where the refugees had their dole stopped from 15 April. On the 16 April, they appealed to the District Magistrate to reinstate it. They were given some ad hoc help for another week, which ended on 26 April. That night, a girl in the camp died of cholera, and the following morning, about 400 people mobbed the office of the camp superintendent, demanding advance payment to organise the funeral of the girl and forcing an assistant to issue a death certificate announcing the death to be due to starvation. The next day, again about 500 or 600 refugees surrounded the office of the camp superintendent and demanded immediate payment of doles. Some of them stopped the Down Gomoh Express in front of the camp office and boarded the train to go to Medinipur town to meet the minister. However, after they left, an officer arrived with money and the doles were restored on 26 April.<sup>108</sup>

The worst of such incidents took place in Dhubulia camp, where trouble had been brewing since early 1950. The camp inmates were extremely dissatisfied with the behaviour of the camp administrator

Mr Mukherjee and on 19 September, they came to protest in front of his office. A police force came to rescue him. In the scuffle that followed, one-armed constable was isolated by the crowd that tried to snatch his rifle. At this point, one round was fired which injured a refugee called Anukul Brahma in the wrist. But he later died of a 'gaping wound' in his stomach, allegedly caused by a bayonet. After that, the administrator took a gun and fired, and unlawfully arrested four refugees, and detained them in the administrative building, where they were allegedly tortured. Following this incident, the government suspended him and prosecuted him on two charges of culpable homicide not amounting to murder and unlawful detention. But he unleashed such a reign of terror in the camp that no one dared to be a witness, and the commandant was eventually acquitted of both charges. He was soon reinstated in his position.<sup>109</sup> One could well imagine what happened in the camp after his reinstatement.

Dhubulia camp remained apparently calm until 3 May 1952. On that night there was a heavy cyclone, completely destroying about 300 huts in the camp, which were already in a state of disrepair. The disaster left about 800 refugees without shelter and a lady called Jayoda Debi, who was visiting a relative that night, lost her life. The camp commandant was not present that night. So, the camp refugees next morning organised a procession with the dead body and planned to go to Calcutta to seek redress. Although this did not eventually happen due to lack of support, a group of refugees squatted on the railway tracks for the whole day to ventilate their complaints against the camp administration. At this point, the camp commandant returned with the Deputy Relief and Rehabilitation Commissioner, who immediately sanctioned money to repair the huts. After a proper inquest, the dead body was also cremated. And the tension subsided for the time being. This autonomous initiative of the camp refugees then attracted the attention of the political parties seeking to get a foothold in the refugee camps. A CPI delegation visited Dhubulia camp on 9 May to establish contacts, but the camp refugees did not show much enthusiasm to outside political intervention.<sup>110</sup> It was not until 1955 that the CPI and the United Central Refugee Council (UCRC) under its influence appeared to have gained a strong foothold in the Dhubulia camp, which accommodated at that time about 25,000 refugees.<sup>111</sup>

## Women as Leaders

Another important feature of camp activism was the initiative and active role taken by the refugee women. Partition broke—or at least weakened—the rigours of patriarchy by blurring the lines between the

private and the public spaces. As Maya Saha of Dhubulia camp put it: 'in our *desh* [homeland] we, the womenfolk of the society, were ignorant and unaware of the outside world. We used to stay in our houses. All on a sudden, the riot placed us on the streets.'<sup>112</sup> The insecurities of the streets traversing across the state borders and the uncertainties of camp life made women claim their agency. They got organised through Mahila Bastuhara Samitis and protested against the maladministration and indignities of camp life. Rachel Weber has argued that this public role for refugee women did not necessarily mean 'coming out' of their stereotypical feminine roles prescribed by patriarchy. But rather, it was an extension of their domestic roles.<sup>113</sup> But we would like to show that in the women's camps where they had no male guardian to ensure their security or restrict their autonomy, but had powerful men in camp administration to deal with for getting justice or redressal of their grievances, the refugee women showed a lot more agency than their middle-class counterparts in the Calcutta colonies. It did not possibly mean that they were able to completely disavow their familial roles, particularly as single mothers, but they were certainly pushing the boundaries.

In March 1952, the residents of Bhadrakali women's camp resorted to a hunger strike to press their demand for more sanitation facilities in the camp, and also to protest against police violence and cases of sexual abuse that the women of the camp were victims of.<sup>114</sup> In 1954, a Mahila Samiti was formed in the camp and it continued to protest against the harsh treatment meted out to them by the Superintendent, who in turn used outside hooligans to intimidate the camp inmates.<sup>115</sup> As the discontent continued, on 9 February 1956, the camp inmates staged a sit-in strike in front of the office of the Superintendent to protest against the transfer of a few families to another camp and the stoppage of their cash doles. The Additional District Magistrate came with the police and unsuccessfully tried to mediate between the agitators and the camp authorities. And then the agitators were attacked by a bunch of outside goons who ostensibly tried to break the movement, injuring ten of the camp inmates, some of them seriously. This brought to the scene refugee organisations like the UCRC and outside political intervention. The beleaguered camp Superintendent misbehaved with the local MLA and refused him entry into the camp, whereupon a large police force was mobilised.<sup>116</sup> On 24 May 1956, there was another meeting at Bhadrakali camp attended by more than a thousand women, who decided that if the government did not work on their demands within the deadline of 28 May, they would organise a sit-in strike in front of the CM's residence.<sup>117</sup> Although that threat ultimately did not materialise, discontent kept brewing in the camp.

When the camp authorities took punitive measures to retaliate

against the organisers of protests and seventeen families had their doles stopped, there was again a meeting on 25 August 1957, when eight of the leading members of the Mahila Samiti were arrested and they were separated from their children. This led to the beginning of a hunger strike by four inmates on 28 August, demanding the transfer of the Superintendent, return of their children, the release of the prisoners, as well as unhindered access into the camp for their leader Saraju Bala Bal, whose name was previously struck off from the camp register. On the 15th day of the hunger strike, when the condition of the strikers became critical, they were forcibly taken to hospital by the authorities, whereupon on 10 September, a new batch of four refugee women started the hunger strike. And when they were arrested, some of them continued their hunger strike in jail. By now, the protest had attracted wider political attention. The UCRC organised a large public meeting on 8 September in front of the camp and another meeting at Subodh Mullick Square in Calcutta on 16 September. Both meetings were attended by large crowds, including inmates from other camps who came to show solidarity. The discontent in Bhadrakali Women's camp continued into 1958, when their protest merged into the wider refugee movement against the government's Dandakaranya scheme (see [Chapter 5](#)).<sup>118</sup>

Bhadrakali was not the only camp that witnessed unprecedented women's activism. In April 1956, another incident was reported from Titagarh No.1 women's camp, where 500 women congregated at a meeting chaired by the local leader Ms Kamala Tanti, who eventually rose to become an influential leader in the refugee movement. They demanded the immediate introduction of the ration, supply of milk for the children, higher cash dole, round-the-clock service of a doctor, and proper sanitation and sewage system in the camp. They also demanded immediate stoppage of abusive behaviour by the male officials of the camp. Such protests were entirely organised through local initiatives, as their meetings were addressed only by speakers from among the camp inmates who spoke in support of the demands.<sup>119</sup>

It was not only in the women's camps that women refugees were taking a leading role in protests. The Ratibati camp in Bardhaman district accommodated the so-called deserters who had left their rehabilitation sites in Orissa, Bihar, and other provinces. Initially, the government had refused to take any responsibility for them, but eventually housed them in transit camps, and gave them cash doles at reduced rates (see [Chapter 4](#) for details). So, in April 1954, the camp inmates of Ratibati, mobilised by the Asansol CPI unit, resolved to launch a movement to demand the full dole amounts. Most significantly, the mode of protest they chose was a hunger strike by



two Dalit refugee women Sisubala Das and Sumati Mali. The strike commenced on 21 April 1954 and by 12 May their condition was critical; yet, despite the pleadings of the local Sub-Divisional Officer, they refused to call it off until their demand was met.<sup>120</sup> Eventually, a full cash dole was restored to the refugees who had returned from other states. This incident further showed the articulate role that refugee women were taking in organising and leading protests of the refugees at the local camp level. And this was not the only instance.

Since the early days of 1949, tension has been mounting in transit camps in the Bardhaman district, like the Gopalpur, Panagarh, and Sibtala camps. Initially, the refugees took to such novel methods of protest as looting the kitchen of the camp employees, confining the District Relief Officer for three hours, or observation of non-cooking days (*arandhan*—a popular mode of protest since the days of the Swadeshi movement in 1905–11) to register their discontent against maladministration in the camps. In all these movements, women took a leading role. Then, on a larger scale, in May 1957, they decided to launch a hunger strike by four refugees, and the group included Sukhoda Bala, a Dalit woman from Panagarh camp. The strike commenced on 12 May and continued until 26 May, when the hunger strikers were forcibly removed by police to a hospital amidst serious physical resistance by the camp inmates, including women and children. On the same day, a new group of four camp refugees started the hunger strike and this group also included another brave Dalit woman, Ahladini Majumder, of Gopalpur camp. They were all arrested on 6 June and that ended the movement.<sup>121</sup>

## Camps as Political Spaces

Acts of resistance in the camps soon got publicised and politicised, bringing in outside political leaders as mediators between the refugees and the government. The hunger strike in the Bardhaman camps attracted the attention of the UCRC and CPI leaders like Benoy Chowdhury and Prankrishna Chakrabarti, who organised several meetings in the camps in support of the hunger strikers and met the CM in search of a peaceful resolution of the crisis.<sup>122</sup> Such instances of camp level resistance regularly featured in newspaper reports of this period. And sometimes camp movements on local issues snowballed into larger campaigns over a wider region. Such instances only indicated that camps as political spaces were never completely insulated, as ideas and influences travelled constantly back and forth. In the cases described in the section on Dissent and Contestation, political leaders intervened at a later stage to support autonomous refugee initiatives. But at places, they organised the movements from

the scratch. At Palla and Chanchai worksite camps in Bardhaman district, Dalit refugee leader Hemanta Biswas from Bagjola camp—at this time a member of the UCRC—was from the early 1956 mobilising the inmates against working at excavation sites of the Damodar Valley Corporation. Also, active in these camps were the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) leaders, Subhamoy Sur, Tushar Kanjilal, and others. They convinced the refugees that while they were being forced to work to earn a living, refugees in transit camps did not have to work for their cash doles. This was discrimination, the refugees complained, and demanded to be immediately rehabilitated. Biswas managed to set up a camp-level Bastuhara Samiti with a Dalit camp refugee, Ganapati Sarkar as President. They held open meetings in the first week of January 1956, asking refugees not to touch the spade if their demand for immediate rehabilitation was not met. On 11 January, Major P.C. Banerjee, the Director of Camps, Dispersal and Transport, came to visit the camp, when some refugees attacked his car. On receipt of this information, a police force was sent to the camps. The refugees at this point appealed to the political leadership—both CPI and RSP—for further support, and Biswas left for Calcutta to secure help.<sup>123</sup>

With outside political intervention, the movement now escalated into a wider campaign, as on 13 January 1956, about 8,000 refugees of Palla worksite camp protested against being forced, irrespective of their expertise and physical abilities, to work at the excavation sites for digging earth to earn a living. When they organised a peaceful demonstration, the camp authorities stopped their cash doles and posted a police force, which harassed many of them. The police action immediately brought further political intervention, and this protest movement spread to other worksite camps in the Bongaon subdivision in the 24-Parganas, where about 35,000 refugees stopped earth digging work and demanded proper rehabilitation. In retaliation, the camp authorities stopped cash doles for about 25,000 refugees in Palla and when they protested against it, the police charged them with bayonets and batons. Few women were injured in the fracas, and 25 demonstrators were arrested. The UCRC leaders Satyapriya Banerjee (MP) and Ambika Chakrabarti (MLA) issued a strong statement condemning the high-handedness of the government and pleaded for speedy redress of the grievances of the refugees.<sup>124</sup> Eventually, through their mediation, a refugee delegation met the Relief and Rehabilitation Minister and the District Relief Officer, but their demand for cash dole was turned down by both.<sup>125</sup>

Another major example of such localised camp-level resistance being organised from the outset through external political intervention was the evolving situation at the Cooper's camp. Political mobilisation

in the camp had started in 1950 under the initiative of the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI), working under the banner of the Bastuhara Panchayat Committee, demanding the camp area to be declared an industrial colony and the improvement of quality and quantity of food ration.<sup>126</sup> Then CPI and UCRC made inroads into the camp, took away the leadership, and recruited some able leaders from among the camp inmates who dominated the locally formed camp Bastuhara Samiti. In 1952, the camp was infected by smallpox and the inmates appealed for better treatment and proper quarantine arrangements for the patients. While no positive measures were taken, the camp administration used the local hooligans to assault refugee leaders, like Jatin Saha and Sarala Debi, the two General Secretaries of the Bastuhara Samiti and Bastuhara Mahila Samiti, both under the influence of the CPI. Then, Ratish Mullick, the President of the Samiti was arrested, leading to a long protest march to the office of the District Magistrate of Krishnanagar and a large public meeting addressed by CPI leaders.<sup>127</sup>

This more overt politicisation of camp protest continued into 1953, as in January the local Bastuhara Samiti organised protest meetings condemning the government rehabilitation policies and corruption of the camp administration. There was a death in the camp due to alleged lack of proper medical treatment; its proper investigation was demanded. Following this, Ratish Mullick was again arrested, and the camp inmates demonstrated in front of the office of the Sub-Divisional Officer, occupied a government building, and restrained the camp administrator. Although he was released after three hours and the office was also vacated, the trouble did not end there. On 15 February, there was a meeting at Ranaghat, attended by 1,500 refugees, where CPI leaders Ambika Chakrabarti and Gaur Kundu along with other leaders of the Bastuhara Samiti made speeches criticising the government and the camp authorities. About a month later, on 17 March, the camp refugees again approached the administrator and demanded the release of Ratish Mullick, and the return of ration cards seized from them earlier. Mullick was released after this, but the trouble did not end there.<sup>128</sup>

There was again a police lathi charge and arrests on 10 April when two refugees resorted to a hunger strike. Following that there was a meeting at Ranaghat Municipal ground on 12 April, where two MLAs, Ambika Chakrabarti (CPI) and Haripada Chatterjee (PSP) spoke, condemning the police action and demanding the release of all the refugees. It was decided that the two MLAs would then visit the CM and apprise him of the grievances of the refugees. This political intervention now extended the protests of the camps to the streets of Calcutta. On 19 April, a refugee meeting at Wellington Square in

Calcutta, convened by Sara Bangla Bastuhara Sammelan (SBBS), controlled by PSP, condemned the police atrocities and demanded an independent inquiry into the conditions of Cooper's camp.<sup>129</sup>

Gradually, in Cooper's camp, the influence of the UCRC and CPI over the local Bastuhara Samiti increased, and these outside leaders not only offered support and political mediation, but they also tried to control the autonomous initiatives of the refugees. For example, on 10 May 1953, there was a meeting of the Bastuhara Samiti at Ranaghat where four CPI leaders made speeches. They demanded the release of all prisoners and removal of the administrators and asked the refugees to unite under the UCRC. But they also chastised the refugees for resorting to hunger strikes without consulting the party leaders first.<sup>130</sup> By the end of the year, the influence of the UCRC was not only well established in Cooper's camp, its activities also started to become overtly political, as it began to use the camp as a venue for provincial meetings to discuss wider political and rehabilitation issues.<sup>131</sup>

But although outside political influence became a reality, the local initiative did not die, as three years later Cooper's camp erupted again. In March 1956, when the authorities distributed low-quality clothing, the refugees organised a massive protest under the leadership of the local Bastuhara Samiti led by camp leaders Ratish Mullick and Jatin Saha. The camp authorities initially bowed down and replaced all the substandard cloth that was distributed. But then, in an act of retaliation, Mullick was arrested under false charges. The UCRC leaders Satayapriya Banerjee and Ambika Chakrabarti immediately issued a statement demanding his unconditional release.<sup>132</sup> But then, on 14 April, Jatin Saha, the Secretary of the Bastuhara Samiti, was also arrested.<sup>133</sup> Enraged by this, the camp inmates organised a protest march on 2 May taking their movement outside the barbed wire fences of the camp. They walked 24 miles from Cooper's camp to the district headquarter in Krishnanagar to meet the District Magistrate, and demanded unconditional release of their leaders, removal of the camp administrator, and improvement in the living condition of their camp. Following this deputation, a meeting was held in Krishnanagar town, where local political leaders addressed the gathering.<sup>134</sup>

The agitation then again moved back to the camp. On 25 June, about 3,000 inmates marched around the camp demanding the release of their leaders and the removal of the camp administrator.<sup>135</sup> The matter did not end there, as the camp administrator now wanted to silence the dissenting voices and dismantle the organisation of the Bastuhara Samiti. On 6 July, a central minister Mr Arunchandra Guha visited the camp; the refugees wanted to give him a memorandum, but

were denied that opportunity and were lathi charged by the police. On 16–17 July, a large police force surrounded the camp, searched for other ringleaders, abused women and children, and ended up arresting forty-four people, including seven women. It again brought in the communist leaders of the UCRC who investigated the situation and issued a press statement criticising the Congress government for this ruthless suppression of refugee voices and shameless support for the corrupt camp administration. The local protests of the camps in this way got drawn into broader political equations. Ultimately, on 23 August, both Mullick and Saha were released from jail, and they came back to Ranaghat to heroes' welcome.<sup>136</sup>

Such camp-level grievances and organised protests were reported from across the province in the late 1950s. In March 1958, the refugees at Bishnupur camp resorted to *satyagraha* demanding better management of their camp, resulting in ninety people being arrested, including twenty-eight women. In the same month, there was a hunger strike at Rupasree Palli camp in Nadia demanding the supply of rice instead of wheat in their ration. About 100 refugees in Dhubulia camp surrounded the jeep of the camp administrator on the same demand, which was granted.<sup>137</sup> Sometimes, instead of being focused on one camp, such protests could be well-orchestrated across several camps in a region. In March 1958, in seventeen camps in Suri in Birbhum district, the refugees surrounded the camp superintendents' tents, shouting slogans for the redress of their local grievances. In one camp, when the local Sub-Divisional Officer came with the Deputy Superintendent of Police, their car was surrounded by the agitators. So, the police had to resort to lathi charge, and seventeen people were arrested. The District Magistrate had to ask for police reinforcements to maintain peace in the region.<sup>138</sup>

While the camp Bastuhara Samitis and the political parties that backed them sought to mobilise all residents of the camps for a joint refugee front, there was also overt use of caste in targeted attempts to mobilise the Namasudra peasant refugees who were arriving in large numbers in these camps. For example, Manohar Roy, who claimed himself to be a right-hand man of Jogendranath Mandal, started a Purba Banga Bastuhara Samiti in Chandmari camp and started mobilising the Namasudra refugees.<sup>139</sup> Gauranga Das, a Namasudra leader in Cooper's camp, thought that at 'the initial stages caste solidarity helped us in dealing with the crises. I was selected as the spokesman for the Namasudras. During the first few agitations in camps I learnt my lessons in organizing and leading protests.' He later joined the CPI.<sup>140</sup> On the other side of the political spectrum, one Ramendra Kishor Mullick, who claimed to be close to P.R. Thakur, also began to mobilise the Namasudra refugees in Bagula and

Dhubulia, asking them not to join any other political party. In largely attended meetings, he discussed ways and means of rehabilitating peasant refugees who had just migrated from East Bengal.<sup>141</sup>

The localised camp-based movements thus provide us with evidence of the autonomous agency of the camp refugees, the majority of them coming from the Dalit castes. What was also remarkable in this story was the emergence of the local Dalit camp leaders like Jatin Saha, Ratish Mullick, Gaur Kundu, Gauranga Das, or Hemanta Biswas. But the growing politicisation of the refugee movement also meant that gradually these local camp leaders began to lose their autonomy as they were drawn into wider provincial political networks. The Fourth Annual Conference of the UCRC was held at Cooper's camp on 7–9 December 1957, where Gaur Kundu and Jatin Saha were made members of the Executive Committee, along with three other Dalit camp refugee leaders Brojendra Das, Mahadeb Das, and Brojeswar Mandal. All other members of the forty-eight-member committee were however *savarna* Hindus.<sup>142</sup> Hemanta Biswas, who once worked with the UCRC, eventually moved to PSP and, in 1959, became a Joint Secretary of the party.<sup>143</sup>

As the Bastuhara Samitis became more and more dependent upon outside political support, they were increasingly coming under non-Dalit leadership. And while in the local camp movements a strict line between violence and non-violence was not always strictly maintained, this refugee radicalism was gradually tamed as they were drawn into the wider refugee politics. The compulsions of a joint movement for rehabilitation imposed on the Namasudras and other Dalit inmates of camps a caste neutral identity of 'refugee'. Their main grievance at this stage was about the absence of adequate provisions and facilities for normal human existence in the camps, and the lack of a proper government policy for their long-term rehabilitation. Their politics of resistance from 1956 came to be mostly focused on the latter issue.<sup>144</sup> But despite conscious attempts to suppress the caste question in the refugee movement, it kept coming back time and again. We will look at the politics of refugee movements in [Chapter 5](#). Before that, let us look at the plight of the Dalit refugees who did not go to any camp.

## Borderlands

Global literature on refugees has shown that displaced people having resources always prefer the option of self-settlement to going to a state-sponsored refugee camp.<sup>145</sup> In West Bengal too there were many Dalit peasants who just crossed the border on foot or by boat, did not go to a refugee registration desk or to any transit camp, and simply

settled down in the border districts. In official parlance, they were known as the 'non-camp refugees'. They did not expect anyone waiting to welcome them with a handsome rehabilitation package; they were prepared to support themselves through their own initiative and entrepreneurship, later receiving some limited government support in the form of loans. In March–April 1950, Dr Gidwani, a Congress Central Relief Committee representative, visited Joynagar, Bongaon, and Jayantipur in the border areas of the 24-Parganas and found that the refugees were just occupying vacant lands and erecting make-shift bamboo huts. All along the border on the side of roads and railway tracks, there were hundreds of 'small colonies of improvised huts'. The civic conditions there were appalling, with an acute shortage of water and an epidemic already breaking in.<sup>146</sup>

Chief Minister B.C. Roy noted in the Assembly in 1957 that unlike East Punjab not many Muslims left West Bengal for Pakistan leaving behind 'a large amount of property ... which could be utilised'.<sup>147</sup> And possibly for that reason, many of the refugees tried to drive out the local Muslims in order to make room for themselves in the border districts of West Bengal. As we have already mentioned ([Chapter 2](#)), some of the worst cases of violence in 1950 took place in the district of Nadia, which had the second-largest refugee population in the state and most of these refugees were settled in rural areas. The District Superintendent of Police wrote in July 1948 that on the date of Partition, Nadia had a majority Muslim population, but in course of a year that social demography was significantly altered due to migration.<sup>148</sup> There was further migration after 1950 and most of these migrants were Namasudra peasants who now tried to force the Muslims to evacuate, resulting in an almost virtual exchange of population.<sup>149</sup> Evidence of that can be seen in the changing demography of Nadia where, according to one calculation, the proportion of Muslim population fell from 52.65 percent in 1947 to 22.36 percent in 1951, while during the same period its Hindu population rose from 45.07 to 77.03 percent.<sup>150</sup> A large section of this new Hindu population of the district were Dalit, as the proportion of SC population of Nadia rose from 2.5 percent in 1941, to 16.72 percent in 1951, and to 20.44 percent in 1961.<sup>151</sup>

If we look at the structure of violence that accompanied this shift in demography in the border regions in the early months of 1950, we will see that after coming to the other side of the border, the Namasudra peasants were dishing out to the local Muslims exactly what they had previously experienced in East Bengal (described in [Chapter 2](#)). It is difficult to present this account in a simple narrative of communal conflict, and not all settlements involved violence. Tetsuya Nakatani studied a village in the border police station of



Taherpur, where almost half of the population were Namasudra refugees who had migrated after 1950. They either occupied vacated Muslim homes and cleared jungles or purchased land from private landowners taking advantage of the government loan scheme for refugees.<sup>152</sup>

It is also true that while many Muslims left their land behind and migrated to the other side of the border, they often tried to get back at harvest time to reap the paddy from those lands, and such attempts were violently resisted by their new occupants.<sup>153</sup> Such incidents of violent fracas between the Muslim and the Namasudra peasants increased manifold after the fresh exodus of refugees after the 1950 riots, when the Namasudras coming over to Nadia tried to force the Muslims still living there to vacate their houses and lands and migrate to Pakistan. Sometimes refugees from camps raided nearby Muslim villages, and when resisted, set fire to their houses. There were reports from both Nadia and Bongaon sub-division of the 24-Parganas that Namasudra migrants were forcibly taking over land from the Muslims and raising their huts.<sup>154</sup> In Bongaon, police reported considerable tension between the two communities, as the 'Namasudra evacuees' tried to 'terrorise the Muslim inmates ... so that they may go away to the East Pakistan by exchanging their houses and properties.'<sup>155</sup> A similar report from Ranaghat Police Station in Nadia around the same time observed that 'some Namasudra refugees are systematically looting and plundering the Muslim properties'.<sup>156</sup> The refugees in the Rupasri Palli camp in Ranaghat in February 1950, when they did not get adequate ration, went out to the adjoining villages and demanded rice and paddy from the local Muslims, threatening to loot their stocks.<sup>157</sup> Often these were organised acts, as refugees in groups of 1,000 to 1,500, armed with sticks and gunny bags, went out on their expeditions to attack Muslim properties.<sup>158</sup>

The other complicating factor was the scarcity of livestock in the region so that the Namasudra refugees often ventured into the Pakistani territory by crossing the river Ichhamati and trying to steal cattle. Similarly, there were reports of Muslims from the Pakistani side entering the border villages in India and taking away cattle across the river. This situation led to a series of conflicts between the two peasant communities from across the international border. And the situation was further complicated by the intervention of the police forces of the two nation-states, zealously trying to protect, and support the interests of their nationals. Sometimes this even involved exchanges of fire between the two police forces, requiring joint enquiries by the two administrations to avoid further diplomatic fallout.<sup>159</sup> The borders between the two nation-states, it appears, still remained fuzzy and porous until they were sealed in 1957 (discussed

in [Chapter 2](#)). And these conflicts appear to have been more for land and livestock—for survival—rather than for nationality or religion or caste. This was a continuation of the post-Partition conjunctural violence that we described in [Chapter 2](#).

But caste remained a factor nonetheless in this environment of violence. These Namasudra refugees had to contend with the locally powerful Hindu groups. There were several recorded incidents of conflict between the Namasudra refugees and the locally entrenched Goalas, who did not like the refugees disturbing the local balance of power, and often sided with the retreating Muslims. Throughout the early 1950s, in the border districts of West Bengal, the village crime notebooks are full of references to the Namasudra refugees being involved in violent strife with the locally powerful groups like the Goalas and Muslims and desperately trying to establish themselves in the area against entrenched hostility.<sup>160</sup> So, a report of a devastating fire in Ramnagar village in the Hanskhali Police Station of Ranaghat sub-division in April 1956, completely burning down 400 refugee huts, and killing livestock,<sup>161</sup> can only raise suspicion about arson!

There was also another dimension of this conflict in the borderlands. When the high caste Hindu refugees, who had arranged exchanges of properties with Muslims, came to take possession of these lands, they faced violent resistance from Namasudra squatters, who had already taken hold of those lands, cultivated them, and claimed their harvests.<sup>162</sup> Police reports suggest that there was a general atmosphere of animosity between the Namasudra refugees, who were mostly illiterate and cultivators, and the more educated upper caste refugees who came looking for land to settle down in the same region.<sup>163</sup> In later years, there were also instances of conflict with the state when the police force came to forcibly vacate ‘unauthorised’ squatter colonies.<sup>164</sup> The history of violent discord in the borderlands of Nadia and 24-Parganas cannot be easily fitted into a simple narrative of the Hindu–Muslim communal binary; caste had a role to play. But more significantly, this situation also reflected a conflict of interests between the resident peasants and the migrants. It became a concern for the political elite when they started discussing the broader issue of long-term rehabilitation of Dalit peasant refugees.

Because of this volatile situation, there were also attempts to organise these refugees and thereby direct their struggles into orderly political action. Such organisational initiatives came from people with a variety of ideological positions—like, Ambika Chakrabarti of CPI, Moksed Ali of RCPI, and Ramen Mullick of Arya Samaj.<sup>165</sup> Then, there was Rasiklal Biswas, a close associate of Jogendranath Mandal and a co-leader of AISC. After Partition, he migrated to India and had settled down in Majdia in Krishnaganj Police Station in Nadia. He was

now associated with the RSP and asked the Namasudra refugees to organise themselves in order to realise their legitimate demands.<sup>166</sup>

However, side-by-side with this unfolding saga of violent confrontations, there were also instances of constructive self-help. In the 24-Parganas in 1950, about 500 Namasudra families along with 200 Barujibi families, 100 Sutradhar, Karmakar, Kumbhakar, and other artisan families and about 200 upper-caste Brahman and Kayastha families were living under bamboo clumps and mango groves near the Madhyamgram railway station. In May 1950, the Deputy Registrar of Co-operative Societies visited the place and registered the 'New Barrackpore Colony Society Ltd.' Initially, a contract agreement was signed for the sale of 25 bighas of land, where 200 Namasudra families immediately moved in and started constructing mud huts.<sup>167</sup> Thus, was founded the nucleus of a new refugee colony in the 24-Parganas.

There was an even larger experiment of Dalit refugee self-settlement in the border region of the 24-Parganas, happening through the initiative of the Namasudra leader P.R. Thakur. He remained loyal to the Congress during the trying days of Partition, which he accepted after getting a solemn pledge from Gandhi and Nehru that rehabilitation of the SCs would be taken care of if they had to migrate from East Pakistan (see [Chapter 1](#)). He himself migrated soon after Partition and for some time remained outside organised politics, as he lost, like other political leaders from East Bengal, his electoral constituency. At this stage of his political career, he also devoted his time to the cause of refugees. We get several reports that in early 1949 and 1950 he was trying to mobilise refugees in the camps, particularly in the 24-Parganas, addressing meetings and planning *satyagrahas* to protest against the government's unsympathetic treatment of the East Bengali refugees.<sup>168</sup> But his activism had another more interesting dimension.

In December 1947, Thakur bought a piece of land in north 24-Parganas between Chandpara and Gobordanga and started the Thakur Land Industries Ltd., with himself as the Chair of the seven-member Board of Directors. This was the beginning of Thakurnagar, the most well-known Dalit refugee colony in West Bengal, started by Dalit independent initiative. It was a small hamlet near the Indo-Pakistan border, about 63 kilometres away from Calcutta. Within the next ten years, it expanded through reclamation of land from the marshy tracts around the place. In 1951, Thakur received a government grant of Rs. 80,000 to develop the infrastructure of the colony, including roads and supply of drinking water, and each family received Rs. 200 and two bundles of corrugated iron for building houses. Thakur also founded the Bengal Relief Society to develop this region further, and

eventually between 1949 and 1952, a post office, a railway station, and a hospital were opened in the Thakurnagar colony, which provided resettlement to 425 refugee families with nearly 4,000 members belonging mainly but not exclusively to Namasudra caste.<sup>169</sup> Many of those Namasudra peasants who migrated after 1950—and continued to migrate thereafter—settled in the two border districts of 24-Parganas and Nadia<sup>170</sup>—where more than half of the Namasudra population in West Bengal now live. In Nadia, large settlements of migrant Namasudra peasants developed through autonomous initiatives in Majdia, Bogula, and Betai areas. In the 24-Parganas, Thakurnagar gradually grew into a major cultural centre for these Dalit refugees.

The main reason for Thakurnagar's popularity was not Thakur's politics, but his role as the Guru of the Matua Mahasangha (MM), a Dalit heterodox religious sect founded by his great grandfather Harichand Thakur in the late nineteenth century and consolidated by his grandfather Guruchand Thakur in the early twentieth. It was through this religious movement that Namasudra social protest had first started and SC politics had been organised in East Bengal in the early twentieth century.<sup>171</sup> By the early 1930s, Pramatha Ranjan had taken over as the head of the Mahasangha, which was registered in 1943. After Partition it functioned from two centres, the East Bengal chapter operated from its original hub in village Orakandi in Faridpur, while Thakurnagar became the new cultural centre of the Matua devotees who had migrated to West Bengal after 1950.<sup>172</sup> In this period of large-scale Dalit migration, Thakur began to visit camps, not so much to organise agitations, but in his role as the spiritual leader of the MM, which many of these refugees were affiliated to.<sup>173</sup> By the early 1960s, he was widely recognised as the hereditary guru of the MM, the followers of which were concentrated in the two border districts of 24-Parganas and Nadia, and various refugee camps.<sup>174</sup>

The East Bengali Dalit refugees who came to India after 1950, thus had a complex trajectory of migration and a heterogeneous history of suffering, struggle, and resettlement. Moving beyond this story of autonomous self-settlement, now let us look at how the Indian state looked at the issue of long-term rehabilitation of the Dalit peasant refugees. In [Chapter 4](#), we will present the evidence of apathy and neglect with which the Indian state treated this particular group of refugees.

<sup>1</sup> 'The Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons in the Second Five Year Plan Period by Shrimati Renuka Ray, Minister for Rehabilitation, West Bengal,' [broadcasted from the Calcutta Station of the All India Radio], Renuka Ray Papers, Subject F. No. 3, NMML.

<sup>2</sup> Morarji Desai to Renuka Ray, 25 August 1960, Renuka Ray Papers, Subject F. No. 5, NMML.

<sup>3</sup> Jhuma Sen, 'Reconstructing Marichjhapi: From Margins and Memories of Migrant Lives', in Urvasi Butalia, ed., *Partition: The Long Shadow*, New Delhi, Zubaan, 2015, 104.

<sup>4</sup> Speech delivered on 7 August 1955 by Renuka Ray at a function organised by DumDum Rajerhat Rehabilitation and Welfare Board, Renuka Ray Papers, Speeches and Writings by her, F. No. 27, NMML.

<sup>5</sup> See Anindita Ghoshal, *Refugees, Borders and Identities: Rights and Habitat in East and Northeast India*, London and New York, Routledge, 2021, 195.

<sup>6</sup> Debjani Sengupta, *The Partition of Bengal: Fragile Borders and New Identities*, Delhi, Cambridge University Press, 2016, 168.

<sup>7</sup> Udit Sen, *Citizen Refugee: Forging the Indian Nation After Partition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, 27–33.

<sup>8</sup> Abhijit Dasgupta, *Displacement and Exile: The State–Refugee Relations in India*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2016, 23–25.

<sup>9</sup> WBLAP, 2 February 1956, 72.

<sup>10</sup> WBLAP, 28 January 1957, 5; 20 March 1957, 188.

<sup>11</sup> A person with a Namasudra name would invariably be classified as 'cultivator' and was sent to the camp because it was assumed that he/she would not have means for survival. One Namasudra graduate schoolteacher narrated the story of how he was classified as 'cultivator' despite his vehement protestation. Interview with Gyanendranath Halder, Calcutta, 20 June 2013.

<sup>12</sup> *Jugantar*, 26–27 March 1950. Interview with Gyanendranath Halder, Calcutta, 20 June 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Subhasri Ghosh and Debjani Dutta, 'Forgotten Voices from the P.L. Camps', in J. Bagchi and S. Dasgupta, eds., *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, vol. 2, Kolkata, Stree, 2009, 207, 209, 212.

<sup>14</sup> WBLAP, 6 June 1957, 97.

<sup>15</sup> For details on these camps, see Anil Singha, *Paschimbanger Udvastu Upanivesh* (Refugee Colonies of West Bengal), Calcutta, Book Club, 1995, 20–21.

<sup>16</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1998, 166–76, quotations from 169–70, 171.

<sup>17</sup> Giorgio Agamben, 'We Refugees', *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures*, 49:2, 1995, 114–19.

<sup>18</sup> Patricia Owens, 'Reclaiming "Bare Life"? Against Agamben on Refugees', *International Relations*, 23:4, 2009, 567–82; Adam Ramadan, 'Spatialising the Refugee Camp', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 38, 2013, 65–77; Romola Sanyal, 'Urbanizing Refuge: Interrogating Spaces of Displacement', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 38:2, 2014, 558–72; Ankur Datta, 'Rethinking Spaces of Exception: Notes From a Forced Migrant's Camp in Jammu and Kashmir', *International Journal of Migration and Border Studies*, 2:2, 2016, 162–75.

<sup>19</sup> Agamben, *Homo sacer*, 175.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in V. F.-Y. Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2007, 9.

<sup>21</sup> The Article 6 of the Indian Constitution, promulgated on 26 January 1950, stipulated that anyone who migrated from Pakistan to India after 19 July 1948 could register with an officer of the government and apply for Indian citizenship after six months of stay in the country. So, it was expected that after six months

in the camps all those refugees could become legitimate citizens of the Indian nation-state. The Citizenship Act of 1955 did not override this constitutional provision for the Hindu displaced persons from Pakistan. Dalit writer Manohar Mouli Biswas describes in his autobiography how after migrating in 1961 he lived in a relative's place for six months and got citizenship. See Manohar Mouli Biswas, *Surviving in My World: Growing Up Dalit in Bengal*, tr. and eds., Angana Dutta and Jaydeep Sarangi, Kolkata, Samya, 2015, 93–94. For more discussion on this, see Ishita Dey, 'On the Margins of Citizenship: Cooper's Camp, Nadia', in A. Basu Ray Chaudhury and I. Dey, *Citizens, Non-citizens and in Camp Lives*, Calcutta: Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, 2009; Niraja Gopal Jayal, *Citizenship and Its Discontents: A Indian History*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2013, 58, 63–64; and [Sen, Citizen Refugee](#), 24. It was only after the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2003 that the citizenship status of these Dalit refugees was seriously questioned. See Praskanva Sinharay, 'To Be a Hindu Citizen: Politics of Dalit Migrants in Contemporary West Bengal', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 42:2, 2019, 359–74.

<sup>22</sup> This has been recently argued by Zamindar, *The Long Partition*, and Haimanti Roy, *Partitioned Lives: Migrants, Refugees, Citizens in India and Pakistan, 1947–1965*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2012.

<sup>23</sup> [Ramadan, 'Spatialising the Refugee Camp'](#), 65–77.

<sup>24</sup> Apart from oral history evidence, we will draw this picture from the following sources. Jogendranath Roy, 'Cooper's Campe chelebela' (Childhood in Cooper's Camp), in Madhumoy Pal, ed., *Deshbhag: Binash o Binirman (Partition: Destruction and Deconstruction)*, Kolkata, Gangchil, 2011, 153–63; Manoranjan Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit*, translated by Sipra Mukherjee, Kolkata, Stree Samya, 2018, 15–22. [Bala, Shikor chenra jiban](#), 179–195. Swati Sengupta Chatterjee, *West Bengal Camp Refugees: Dispersal and Caste Question 1950–1965*, Kolkata, Sreejoni, 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Nilanjana Chatterjee, 'Midnight's Unwanted Children: East Bengali Refugees and the Politics of Rrehabilitation', Unpublished PhD thesis, Brown University, 1992, 172–73.

<sup>26</sup> [Dasgupta, Displacement and Exile](#), 61.

<sup>27</sup> Roy, 'Cooper's Campe chelebela', 154.

<sup>28</sup> [Dasgupta, Displacement and Exile](#), 62.

<sup>29</sup> Gaur Kundu, 'Cooper's Camp Udbastu Sibir na Concentration Camp?', *Swadhinata*, 14 June 1956.

<sup>30</sup> Chatterjee, 'Midnight's Unwanted Children', 175.

<sup>31</sup> [Byapari, Interrogating My Chandal Life](#), 15.

<sup>32</sup> By contrast, the literary source of Narayan Sanyal's *Bakultala P.L. Camp* (1955) provides a rather generous description of a room of eighty feet by twenty accommodating eight families, and this meant 200 square feet per family. [Sengupta, The Partition of Bengal](#), 171.

<sup>33</sup> [Bala, Shikor chenra jiban](#), 187–88.

<sup>34</sup> [Bala, Shikor chenra jiban](#), 187–88.

<sup>35</sup> 'Confidential report of 4 April 1952 regarding the arrival of the refugees of Ranaghat Cooper's Camp, at Sealdah railway station on 3 April 1952', IB, F. No. 982/48-Sealdah, WBSA.

<sup>36</sup> See reports in IB, F. No. S. No. 313/39, F. No. 303/39, Part II; 303/39; F. No. 1483/32 WBSA.

<sup>37</sup> *Swadhinata*, 5 June 1958.

<sup>38</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 18 April 1950.



- 39 Sengupta Chatterjee, *West Bengal Camp Refugees*, 43.
- 40 WBLAP, 3 February 1956, 81–82.
- 41 Sengupta Chatterjee, *West Bengal Camp Refugees*, 44; Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, 15.
- 42 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 24 April 1950.
- 43 Roy, 'Cooper's Campe chelebela', 155.
- 44 *Swadhinata*, 29 March 1956.
- 45 WBLAP, 23 August 1955, 410.
- 46 WBLAP, 1 April 1960, 13.
- 47 Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, 18.
- 48 WBLAP, 3 February 1956, 81–82. Dettol was an antiseptic liquid for cuts and bruises.
- 49 Sengupta Chatterjee, *West Bengal Camp Refugees*, 47. For more details on morbidity in camps, see 47–50.
- 50 Halder, *Blood Island*, 35.
- 51 WBLAP, 11 February 1956, 417.
- 52 Group interview with inmates of Sonarpur worksite camp, Calcutta, 26 January 1914. For a similar testimony, also see Ghosh and Dutta, 'Forgotten Voices', 213.
- 53 Byapari, *Interrogating my Chandal Life*, 18–19.
- 54 WBLAP, 1 April 1960, 32.
- 55 Dasgupta, *Displacement and Exile*, 64.
- 56 Hironprava Das, interview with Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, Cooper's Camp, 13 December 2001.
- 57 Chatterjee, 'Midnight's Unwanted Children', 176.
- 58 Sengupta Chatterjee, *West Bengal Camp Refugees*, 45–46.
- 59 Nehru Memorial Museum and Library Oral History Project. Shri Pran Krishna Chakraborty (interviewee), recorded by Dr Hari Dev Sharma (interviewer), dt. 11 November 1976, 94–95.
- 60 Bala, *Shikor chenra jiban*, 197.
- 61 Halder, *Blood Island*, 34.
- 62 Interview with Nalini Ranjan Mandal, Bagjola, 12 February 2014.
- 63 Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, 19–20.
- 64 WBLAP, 4 December 1959, 587.
- 65 *Jugantar*, 10 June 1950.
- 66 Interview with Maho Rajbansi, Cooper's Camp, 18 March 2013.
- 67 Bala, *Shikor chenra jiban*, 254–70.
- 68 Interview with Maho Rajbansi, Cooper's Camp, 18 March 2013.
- 69 For more discussion on this stereotype of lazy Bengali refugees, see Haimanti Roy, *Partitioned Lives: Migrants, Refugees, Citizens in India and Pakistan, 1947–1965*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2012, 198–200.
- 70 Sengupta, *The Partition of Bengal*, 172.
- 71 WBLAP, 4 December 1959, 601.
- 72 Group meeting with inmates of Sonarpur worksite camp, Calcutta, 26 January 1914.
- 73 Dasgupta, *Displacement and Exile*, 64.
- 74 Sarajubala Ghot, interview with Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, Cooper's Camp, on 13 December 2001.
- 75 Kundu, 'Cooper's Camp'.
- 76 Chatterjee, 'Midnight's Unwanted Children', 176.
- 77 Maya Saha, interview with Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, Dhubulia, on 25



March 2007.

<sup>78</sup> Deep Halder, *Blood Island: An Oral History of the Marichjhapi Massacre*, Noida, HarperCollins, 2019, 35.

<sup>79</sup> Chatterjee, 'Midnight's Unwanted Children', 176.

<sup>80</sup> WBLAP, 1 April 1960, 35–36; Sengupta Chatterjee, *West Bengal Camp Refugees*, 49.

<sup>81</sup> Sengupta, *The Partition of Bengal*, 172.

<sup>82</sup> Sengupta, *The Partition of Bengal*, 171.

<sup>83</sup> Sanyal, 'Urbanizing Refuge', 560.

<sup>84</sup> Ravinder Kaur, *Since 1947: Partition Narratives Among Punjabi Migrants of Delhi*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007, 168–73; Akanksha Kumar, 'Revisiting Partition of India 1947—Voice of Dalit Refugees', *International Journal of Social Science and Economic Research*, 4:3, March 2019, 2112–33.

<sup>85</sup> Interview with Maho Rajbansi, Cooper's Camp on 18 March 2013. Also see, Extract from W.C.R. of the Supdt. of Police, Murshidabad for the week ending 30 July 1949, IB, F. No. 1809/48 (Midnapore), WBSA.

<sup>86</sup> This fact came out through a group interview with the residents of the Women's Camp at Cooper's, on 9 February 2013.

<sup>87</sup> B.S. Guha, *Department of Anthropology, Government of India, Memoir No. 1, 1954, Studies in Social Tensions Among the Refugees From Eastern Pakistan*, Delhi, Manager of Publication, 1959, 2–16, 37–38, 47–49; the quotation is from 9.

<sup>88</sup> Interview with Ashok Chakrabarti, Cooper's Camp, 18 March 2013; Bagjola Camp group meeting 22 June 2013.

<sup>89</sup> Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, 'Politics of Rehabilitation in Struggle of the Lower Caste Refugees in West Bengal', *Voice of Dalit*, 3:1, January–June, 2010, 72.

<sup>90</sup> Group meeting with inmates of Bagjola Camp on 22 June 2013.

<sup>91</sup> 'Extract from an I.B. Officer's Report, dt. 24 March 1958, IB, S. No. F. No. 96–49, Part II, WBSA.

<sup>92</sup> Datta, 'Rethinking spaces of exception', 164.

<sup>93</sup> Agamben, *Homo sacer*, 174.

<sup>94</sup> Quoted in Dibyadyuti Roy, 'From Non-places to Places: Transforming Partition Rehabilitation Camps Through the Gendered Quotidian', *Millennial Asia*, 9:1, 2018, 19–39, quotation in 25.

<sup>95</sup> Zamindar, *The Long Partition*, 35.

<sup>96</sup> W.C.R. dt. 29 August 1950 of Chandmari Refugee Camp, IB, F. No. 1809/48 (Nadia), WBSA.

<sup>97</sup> Ghosh and Dutta, 'Forgotten Voices', 213–14.

<sup>98</sup> Renuka Ray, who was the State Minister of Rehabilitation has praised the 'compassion and ability' of dedicated officers at the Rehabilitation Directorate. However, the experiences of the refugees with camp officials were very different. Renuka Roy, 'And Still They Come', in J. Bagchi and S. Dasgupta, eds., *The Trauma and the Partition: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, Kolkata, Stree, 2003, 85. For counter evidence, see Chatterjee, 'Midnight's Unwanted Children', 177; Sengupta, *The Partition of Bengal*, 173; Ghosh and Dutta, 'Forgotten Voices', 213–14.

<sup>99</sup> Joya Chatterji, 'Right or Charity? The Debate over Relief and Rehabilitation in West Bengal, 1947–50', in Suvir Kaul, ed., *The Partitions of Memory: The Afterlife of the Division of India*, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2001, 77–91.

<sup>100</sup> Chatterjee, 'Midnight's Unwanted Children', 177.

- 101 Chatterji, 'Right or Charity', 91–101.
- 102 Prangobinda Das, interview with Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, 13 December 2001.
- 103 Dey, 'On the Margins'.
- 104 From Secy. Relief and Rehabilitation, Government of West Bengal, to D.I.G., IB, Calcutta, dt. 13 December 1949, IB, F. No. 1809/48 (Main), WBSA.
- 105 See various police abstracts for the year 1950 in IB, F. No. 1809/48 (Main), and F. No. 1809/48 (Midnapore), WBSA.
- 106 Interview with Ashok Chakrabarti, Cooper's Camp, 18 March 2013.
- 107 Report week ending 12 June 1949 and 10 July 1949, IB, F. No. 1838-48, Part III, WBSA.
- 108 Abstract dt. 6 May 1950; copy of a report of a D.I.O. dt. 28 April 1950, IB, F. No. 1809/48 (Midnapore), WBSA.
- 109 Report for week ending 24 September 1950, IB, F. No. 1838/40, Part III, WBSA; WBLAP, 13 March 1952, 20–21.
- 110 'Report Re. The Dhubulia Camp Incident on 8 May', IB, S. No. 313/39, F. No. 303/39, Part II; Confidential report of Sealdah railway station, dt. 8 May 1952, IB, F. No. 982/48-Sealdah, WBSA.
- 111 Copy of an English letter dt. 3 October 1955 in an Inland letter from Amritendu Mukherjee ... to the Secretary, West Bengal D.C. Communist Party of India ..., IB, S. No. 313/39, F. No. 303/39, Part II, WBSA.
- 112 Interview with Maya Saha by Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, Dhubulia, 25 March 2007.
- 113 Rachel Weber, 'Re(Creating) the Home: Women's Role in the Development of Refugee Colonies in South Calcutta', in J. Bagchi and S. Dasgupta, eds., *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, vol. 1, Calcutta, Stree, 2003, 76–77.
- 114 Paula Banerjee and Sucharita Sengupta, 'The Refugee Movement: A Founding Moment of Popular Movement', in Ranabir Samaddar, ed., *From Popular Movements to Rebellion: The Naxalite Decade*, New Delhi, Social Science Press, 2018, 38.
- 115 Sengupta Chatterjee, *West Bengal Camp Refugees*, 84.
- 116 *Swadhinata*, 11 February, 12 February, 14 February 1956.
- 117 *Swadhinata*, 25 May 1956.
- 118 See for details, Sengupta Chatterjee, *West Bengal Camp Refugees*, 84–88.
- 119 *Swadhinata*, 15 April 1956.
- 120 Sengupta Chatterjee, *West Bengal Camp Refugees*, 82–84.
- 121 Sengupta Chatterjee, *West Bengal Camp Refugees*, 78–82.
- 122 *Ibid.*
- 123 Extract from Report dt. 28 February 1956 in Connection With the Incidents in Palla Worksite Camps, P.S. Memari, District Burdwan, IB, S. No. 41/24, F. No. 95/24, WBSA.
- 124 *Swadhinata*, 15 January, 18 January, 4 February, 12 February 1956.
- 125 Sengupta Chatterjee, *West Bengal Camp Refugees*, 92.
- 126 Abstract dt. 22 April 1950, IB, F. No 1809/48 (Nadia) WBSA; Dey, 'On the Margins'.
- 127 Tushar Sinha, *Maranjayi Sangrame Bastuhara* (Refugees in *Death Defying Struggles*), Kolkata, Dasgupta & Co., 1999, 24–28.
- 128 Extract from Memo No. 691/ (3)-C/IV-9/53, dt. 30 March 1953, IB, S. No. 70/24, F. No. 1652/24, Part V, WBSA.
- 129 Abstract Para 1239, dt. 11 April 1953, IB, F. No. 96-49, Part II; WBPA

1310, dt. 25 April 1953, IB, S. No. 70/24, F. No. 1652/24, Part V, WBSA.

<sup>130</sup> WBPA 1618, dt. 23 May 1953, IB, S. No. 70/24, F. No. 1652/24, Part V, WBSA.

<sup>131</sup> WBPA 3089, dt. 7 November 1953; WBPA 181, dt. 16 January 1954, IB, S. No. 70/24, F. No. 1652/24, Part V, WBSA.

<sup>132</sup> *Swadhinata*, 8 April 1956.

<sup>133</sup> *Swadhinata*, 15 April 1956.

<sup>134</sup> *Swadhinata*, 3 May 1956.

<sup>135</sup> *Swadhinata*, 26 June 1956.

<sup>136</sup> Dey, 'On the Margins'; *Swadhinata*, 18 July, 19 July, 26 August 1956.

<sup>137</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 16 March 1958.

<sup>138</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 11 March 1958.

<sup>139</sup> Report on the Refugee Situation for the week ending 19 November 1950, IB, F. No. 1838/48, Part III, WBSA.

<sup>140</sup> Dasgupta, *Displacement and Exile*, 64.

<sup>141</sup> Report on the Refugee Situation for the week ending 19 February 1950, IB, F. No. 1838/48, Part III; copy of a Report of a D.I.O. of Nadia District, dt. 3 July 1950, IB, F. No. 1809-48, Nadia, WBSA.

<sup>142</sup> Report of the Fourth Annual Conference of the U.C.R.C. held at Cooper's Camp, Ranaghat on the 7–9 December 1957, forwarded under Memo dt. 11 December 1957, S.P., D.I.B., Malda, IB, S. No. 313/39, F. No. 303/39, Part II; copy of an IB officer's observation report of 4th Annual conference of the UCRC dt. 19 December 1957, IB, F. No. 96-49, Part II, WBSA.

<sup>143</sup> Extract from SBDN dt. 12 January 1959, IB, F. No. 96-49, Part II, WBSA.

<sup>144</sup> Interview with Ashok Chakrabarti, Cooper's Camp, on 18 March 2013.

<sup>145</sup> Roy, 'From Non-places to Places', 31.

<sup>146</sup> The minutes of the meeting of the Executive Committee of Central Relief Committee held on 18th April 1950, AICC Papers (2nd Instalment), F. No. 3738A, NMML.

<sup>147</sup> WBLAP, 21 March 1957, 244.

<sup>148</sup> Supdt. of Police, D.I.B., Nadia, to Spl. Supdt. of Police, IB, 28 July 1948, IB, F. No. 1238-47 (Nadia), KW, WBSA.

<sup>149</sup> For reports on such attacks and Muslim exodus from Nadia see, 'Report for week ending 11 June 1950', IB, F. No. 1838-48, Part III, WBSA.

<sup>150</sup> Subashri Ghosh, 'The Working of the Nehru-Liaquat Ali Khan Pact: A Case Study of Nadia District, 1950', in *Proceedings of the 68th Session of the Indian History Congress*, New Delhi, ICHR, 2008, 853–62, cited in Anindita Ghoshal, *Refugees, Borders and Identities: Rights and Habitat in East and Northeast India*, London and New York, Routledge, 2021, 65.

<sup>151</sup> Dasgupta, *Displacement and Exile*, 38, 44.

<sup>152</sup> Tetsuya Nakatani, 'Partition Refugees on Borders: Assimilation in West Bengal', in A. Dasgupta, M. Togawa and A. Barkat, eds., *Minorities and the State: Changing Social and Political Landscape of Bengal*, New Delhi, Sage, 2011, 66–73.

<sup>153</sup> See, Extract from W.C.R. of Hanskhali P.S. for the week ending 6 November 1949; copy of a Report of a A.S.I. of Police of Banpur B.O.P., 24 August 1949, IB, F. No. 1238-47 (Nadia), WBSA.

<sup>154</sup> Reports for the week ending 12 February 1950, 9 April 1950, 30 April 1950, IB, F. No. 1838-48, Part III, WBSA.

<sup>155</sup> Report for the week ending 7 May 1950, IB, F. No. 1838-48, Part III, WBSA.

<sup>156</sup> Copy of a Report of D.I.O. of Nadia district, 28 June 1950, IB, F. No.

1809-48, Nadia, WBSA.

<sup>157</sup> Report on the Refugee Situation for week ending 5 February 1950, IB, F. No. 1838-48, Part III, WBSA.

<sup>158</sup> Report on the Political Activities of the Refugees and Corruption in Refugee Camps for the week ending 2 July 1950, IB, F. No. 1838-48, Part III, WBSA.

<sup>159</sup> Report of a Joint Enquiry held by D.M., Kushthia and D.M., Nadia at Darsana on 30 July 1950 and 18 August 1950, into Certain Border Incidents, IB, F. No. 1238-47 (Nadia), WBSA. Several other reports on such incidents can be seen in IB, F. Nos. 1238-47 (Nadia), 1809-48 (Nadia), and 1838-48, Part III, WBSA.

<sup>160</sup> Shantipur Police Station, Village Tewarimath, and Char Nrisinghapur, Village Crime Notebook No. 22/9/53; I am indebted to Basudeb Chattopadhyay for this reference.

<sup>161</sup> *Swadhinata*, 7 April 1956.

<sup>162</sup> Report week ending 25 May 1950; Abstract dt. 10 June 1950, IB, F. No. 1838-48, Part III, WBSA.

<sup>163</sup> Report on the Political Activities of the Refugees and Competition in Refugee Camps for the week ending 23 July 1950, IB, F. No. 1838-48, Part III, WBSA.

<sup>164</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 10 August 1958.

<sup>165</sup> Report on the Political Activities of the Refugees and Corruption in the Refugee Camps for the week ending 6 August 1950 and 26 November 1950, IB, F. No. 1838-48, Part III, WBSA.

<sup>166</sup> Report on the Political Activities of the Refugees and Corruption in the Refugee Camps for the week ending 3 September 1950, IB, F. No. 1838-48, Part III, WBSA.

<sup>167</sup> Letter from the Founders of the New Barrackpur Colony Ltd., dt. 3 May 1950, to S.P. Mukherji, S.P. Mukherjee Papers, Subject, F. No. 34, NMML.

<sup>168</sup> Extract from C.T.S. (10) dt. 11 January 1949; Bengali leaflet 'Nikhil Banga Bastuhara Sammelan (Dwitiya adhibeshan), Naihati Sarkar barir maath', 2 January Rabibar (1949), IB, F. No. 1809/48 (Main); Abstract dt. 29 April 1950, IB, F. No. 1809/48 (Malda), WBSA.

<sup>169</sup> Manosanto Biswas, *Banglar Matua Andolon: Samaj, Sanskriti, Rajneeti* (The Matua Movement of Bengal: Society, Culture, Politics), Kolkata, Setu Prakasani, 2016, 266–70; also see WBLAP, June–August 1958, 64–65.

<sup>170</sup> For more discussion on Namasudra refugees who settled in Nadia, see Nakatani, 'Partition Refugees on Borders', 66–87.

<sup>171</sup> For details, see Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872–1947*, Second edition, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2011, Chapter 2.

<sup>172</sup> Biswas, *Banglar Matua Andolon*, 266–70; Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 262–73.

<sup>173</sup> Interview with Ashok Chakrabarti, Cooper's Camp, 18 March 2013.

<sup>174</sup> See petitions from Matua Mahasngha devotees in IB, F. No. 2076-50, WBSA.

**Dispersal Plans**

According to the Constitution of India, promulgated in 1950, relief and rehabilitation was a state subject, and so the state government in West Bengal under the chief ministership of Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy, with no experience of handling any human disaster of such magnitude, was called upon to deal with this sudden massive influx of refugees that continued for years in varying and uncertain flows.<sup>1</sup> On 10 March 1950, by way of asking for a grant for refugee rehabilitation, Roy in a rather sympathetic tone told the West Bengal Legislative Assembly:

Sir, a refugee is a person who is displaced from the usual home and is bereft of all means of sustenance and leaves his home and seeks shelter and protection elsewhere ... As the members are aware, during the last six weeks or so people have begun coming into West Bengal again after a lull of nearly 8 or 9 months. The difference between a refugee on this occasion and a refugee on the past occasion is that men who are coming away now have come under panic and many of them have been forced out of their own homes not only without any means of livelihood but even leaving behind everything they possessed ... they have arrived here only with one change of clothing and nothing else.<sup>2</sup>

For the earlier group of refugees, arriving in 1948–49 and numbering between 1.3 and 1.5 million people, the West Bengal government had offered a reasonably good rehabilitation package, Roy claimed. This included initial cash doles, eventual allocation of plots of agricultural land and/or homestead land, with loans for developing or reclaiming the land and building houses. The government also built 5,000 houses and distributed them among the refugees. The artisans, skilled workers, and small businessmen received various kinds of trade and business loans. The government also arranged for vocational training for the refugees to help them adjust to a new labour market. As for the new arrivals, the government's plan was to offer them the same facilities, but there was also a realisation 'that these men will perhaps require more relief before they can be expected to be rehabilitated.' But what exactly could be offered would depend on how much the central government would be willing to pay.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, the Government of India (GI) had different plans. On 15 March 1950, Prime Minister Nehru, accompanied by Chief Minister (CM) Roy, visited the Rupasree camp in Ranaghat in Nadia district and assured the refugees that the Indian state would assist them in all possible ways. 'You have come through lots of pain and suffering', Nehru told them. 'We extend you a warm welcome. All possible arrangements will be made for you.' But he also did not forget to remind them that they were expected to work hard to overcome these hard times. He assured them that the condition of the camp would improve over time, but in the future they should be prepared to move to some other places.<sup>4</sup> On 31 October, President Dr Rajendra Prasad, accompanied by Governor Dr Kailash Nath Katju, visited Dhubulia and Cooper's Camp. While giving the refugees assurance about assistance and all rights as citizens, he too reminded them that the camps were temporary shelters, and they might have to go to other places, possibly in neighbouring states, for more permanent rehabilitation.<sup>5</sup>

The two speeches indicated clearly that from the very early days when the second wave of refugee influx started, the central government was thinking of a dispersal plan as a possible solution to the problem of rehabilitation of the East Bengali refugees. As Udit Sen has recently shown, this was in keeping with the Nehruvian idea of tying up refugee rehabilitation to the issue of national development in areas where refugee labour could be productively used. This idea could be traced back to as early as 1948.<sup>6</sup> And this dispersal plan was supposed to be good for national integration too. On 29 March 1950, Governor Katju supported the dispersal scheme on the ground that 'if there was a large introduction of different elements into their national being in different States, ... that would create healthy influence and would enable them to get rid of the evil like provincialism.'<sup>7</sup>

On 18 March 1950, the Indian parliament approved Rs. 61.5 million for relief, and the central government assured the House that 'every refugee from East Bengal who wished to be rehabilitated in India would be provided for and want of funds was not going to deter the Government from carrying out this obligation. There is no question of anybody being asked against his will to go back.'<sup>8</sup> As shown in [Table 4.1](#), in 1952–53, as the refugee influx increased despite the Delhi Pact, the GI significantly increased grants and loans to the state government for the purpose of providing relief to the East Bengali refugees, and it continued to rise steadily until 1956–57. However, as the state government still remained in charge of rehabilitation, it continued to disburse or spend central funds on projects according to its own priorities. Until 1954, as Congress leader Sucheta Kripalani and the Hindu Mahasabha leader N.C. Chatterjee

observed in the Indian parliament, ‘the Government was thinking that the people would go back and it was more a question of relief and not rehabilitation.’<sup>9</sup> But in 1954, because of a fact-finding committee report, the chief focus of state policy shifted from relief to rehabilitation, as it was finally realised and acknowledged that very few of the refugees would return to their previous homeland.<sup>10</sup> In December 1956, the central government directly took over the responsibility of rehabilitation. At that time, there were 297,000 camp refugees and out of them, the central government undertook to rehabilitate 240,000, and the rest were left in the charge of the state government.<sup>11</sup> It was at this point that the central Minister for Rehabilitation, Mehr Chand Khanna, decided to expeditiously introduce a dispersal plan. The state and the central governments were mostly on the same page on this policy, but there were subtle differences too and that added interesting dimensions to this rehabilitation narrative, which we will discuss next.

**Table 4.1** Grants and Loans for Rehabilitation from Government of India

Year	Grant (1) Rs.	Loan (2) Rs.	Grant (3) Rs.	Loan (4) Rs.
1951–52		<del>6,088,700</del>		
1952–53		<del>32,388,000</del>		
1953–54		<del>29,828,060</del>		
1954–55		<del>42,588,000</del>		
1955–56		<del>67,890,000</del>		
1956–57		<del>99,488,000</del>		
Total		<del>338,288,060</del>		

Source: WBLAP, 6 April 1960, 14.

For the state government, the attitude of sympathy and support, which the CM had earlier shown, was evaporating as the unending stream of refugees showed no sign of slowing down. For the rehabilitation of these East Bengali refugees, there was a high-powered meeting in Calcutta in June 1954, attended by the State CM and the Union Finance and Rehabilitation Ministers. It decided that since these migrants were mostly cultivators, they were to be resettled in agriculture and priority would be given to the rehabilitation of the camp refugees. The West Bengal government already had four different schemes to rehabilitate agriculturist refugees in rural areas, but none of them worked and had high rates of desertion.<sup>12</sup> And then, as the influx continued unabated, there was a realisation that there was not enough land in the state to rehabilitate this unending flow of refugees. Hence, ‘owing to the increasing volume of the influx of refugees and the paucity of land in West Bengal,’ it was decided that all those arriving after June 1954 would be ‘settled outside the State’.<sup>13</sup> From now on, the Bengal Congress leaders began to repeat ad



infinitum that West Bengal had reached a 'saturation point' and could not absorb any more refugees. In June 1955, the provincial Congress President and MP Atulya Ghosh announced that 'only those who were prepared to go out of the state could receive rehabilitation benefits . ... Because West Bengal had virtually reached a *saturation point* in regard to the availability of land and other resources for rehabilitation.'<sup>14</sup> The Rehabilitation Minister Renuka Ray also repeated the same argument. In a meeting on 7 August 1955, she emphasised that 'we have reached a *saturation point* and ... it is beyond the capacity and power of this state to provide land for cultivators and even for homesteads in urban areas for those who are newcomers and will still continue to come.'<sup>15</sup>

The central government, which was paying the bills, was eager to close the camps and settle the refugee problem once and for all. It did not want the refugees to stay very long in camps: 'the longer the persons stay in camps the greater is their resistance to dispersal.' So, it decided that most of the camp refugees would be speedily sent to other states, while 'on a priority basis only the refugees who had come before June 1954 should be given rehabilitation in W. Bengal.' By 1955-56, the central government became more impatient and decided that all refugees staying in camps would be moved outside West Bengal and so it no longer was willing to maintain the distinction between pre- and post-June 1954 migrants. The state government did not like that distinction to be elided, but accepted the dispersal policy without any other reservation.<sup>16</sup>

There were also other arguments in favour of dispersal. On 31 March 1956, Congress leader Sucheta Kripalani argued in Lok Sabha that the rehabilitation of refugees should not be West Bengal's sole responsibility, because Partition was an all-India decision. It was therefore 'a national problem and all the states should pull their weight in rehabilitating them.'<sup>17</sup> The Bengal Congress leader Tarun Kanti Ghose also thought that 'this refugee rehabilitation problem was not West Bengal's problem alone, it was a problem for entire India', and everyone should share the burden. This was a very legitimate expectation, he thought, because a large section of West Bengal's industrial labour force was non-Bengali, i.e. they came from other states. So those states also had a responsibility to absorb some of the excess migrant workers from West Bengal.<sup>18</sup> Some of the Leftist leaders in the opposition, like Renu Chakrabarti, would also like to see rehabilitation to be treated as a 'national problem'.<sup>19</sup>

On 1 February 1956, the Governor's speech in the Legislative Assembly announced what the government thought to be the next phase of its refugee rehabilitation scheme:

it is difficult to find sufficient land in which refugees can be settled. Reclamation of water-logged areas and sub-marginal lands has been undertaken, but the process will take time. Even then there will not be enough land to meet our growing requirements. Possibilities of securing land in other States for settling refugees are, therefore, being explored.<sup>20</sup>

Along with that, other schemes were announced too, like a generous loan scheme for house building, development of agricultural land and small-scale industries, as well as an ambitious industrialisation policy. Ultimately, the meeting of the Eastern Zone Council held in Calcutta on 4 August 1958 agreed in principle that the burden of rehabilitation should be shared by all the neighbouring states, but no concrete decision was taken, as many chief ministers were still reluctant to actually share the responsibility.<sup>21</sup>

Along with that, an industrial policy was also developed in collaboration with private industrialists to establish factories in areas with 'high refugee concentration' in order to provide employment for such people. In 1955, the government invested Rs. 20 million in this project, which was expected to generate 8,000 jobs. The longer-term plan was to invest Rs. 70 million in the next five years, and it was expected to result in 32,000 'direct employment' and about 100,000 'indirect employment' for the refugees.<sup>22</sup> But this industrialisation scheme ultimately proved to be a failure. By the end of 1958, as Jyoti Basu pointed out in the Assembly, while the sanctioned projects had promised to give employment to 5,260 refugees, only 1,071 had received any job at all. Rampant corruption led to the profits ending up in private hands, with refugees continuing to suffer. Through a proper industrialisation policy, Basu reiterated, all the refugees could be rehabilitated in Bengal. It would have benefited both the refugees and Bengal.<sup>23</sup>

The industrialisation plan got a new life in February 1959 when a Rehabilitation Industries Corporation was set up with the Gandhian industrialist G.D. Birla as the Chairman. The GI initially paid the entire capital, although it was conceived to be a public-private collaborative enterprise. The central government would give it Rs. 100 million, which it would forward to private industrialists as loans against specific industrial projects to be set up near refugee colonies to generate employment for the refugees. But by January 1960, the Corporation had only notionally approved the setting up of two new industrial complexes—one at Behala and the other at Bonhooghly, both near Calcutta—and gave loans to ten other industrial units.<sup>24</sup> It was hardly enough to meet the enormous need for employment for the refugees.

So, in the end, the most convenient option that the government found as a quick solution for the rehabilitation problem was to resettle

the refugees in other provinces. The initial decision was to rehabilitate them in the Andaman Islands and in some of the neighbouring provinces where vacant land was available. Of these dispersal schemes, the Andaman project was a success story for the East Bengali refugees.<sup>25</sup> The colonisation of the Andaman Islands to transform the penal colony had started as early as the mid-1920s. Then, after the end of Japanese occupation in 1945, the British government again started planning for the redevelopment and colonisation of the Andaman Islands, and settlement of people from other parts of India began in January 1946.<sup>26</sup> In June 1947, there was a proposal to set up 'a corporation in which private companies and the government would co-operate to exploit the forests of the Andaman Island.'<sup>27</sup> The plan remained in the public domain after independence and there was also a lot of media discussion as to whether these islands, previously used as penal colonies, would be suitable for any large-scale human settlement.<sup>28</sup> In November 1948, an 'Andaman Exploratory Delegation' reported to the GI the immense potential of Andaman for colonisation as well as the exploitation of its mineral and forest resources. But it required specialist labour—pioneer cultivators and artisans.<sup>29</sup>

The arrival of East Bengali refugees solved the problem. Rehabilitation Minister Mohanlal Saxena was delighted to discover in them a large reservoir of 'cheap man-power available in the country'. He did not have the '*slightest doubt*' that they would '*make a fruitful contribution to the solution of the country's economic problems*'.<sup>30</sup> As Udit Sen has pointed out, this strategy was related to the Nehruvian idea of refugee rehabilitation, harnessing their labour power to projects of national development. And the policy of settling East Bengali refugees in Andaman was adopted only after attempts to recruit from other social groups like the ex-servicemen and Punjabi refugees had failed.<sup>31</sup> On 27 December 1948, the GI issued a press note that it would invite applications from the East Bengali refugees for settlement in the Andaman. This settlement was to be entirely voluntary and so to entice applicants, a media campaign was launched to advertise its natural beauty, healthy climate, and sound infrastructural facilities.<sup>32</sup> The registration of interest was opened in April 1948 and those who arrived in India on or before 25 June 1948 were eligible to apply. There were so many applications that registration had to be closed on 15 January 1949, although the government had not yet decided on a quota.<sup>33</sup>

It was in 1949 that H. Shivdasani of the Home Department of the GI prepared a detailed plan for colonisation of the Andaman Islands with refugee labour. The report proposed to offer to the agriculturist refugees free passage, ten acres of land, exemption from all revenues

for two years, plough cattle and milch cattle, seeds as well as agricultural implements free of cost. They were also to be given proprietary right over the land, but with an important restriction on the right to transfer or sub-lease, so that they could not become rent-receiving zamindars. The Shivdasani Report, as Madhumita Mazumdar argued, thus proposed to extend agriculture in Andaman Islands 'through use of quasi-coerced labour', who would be given limited land right that would tie them to the land but would not give them 'sovereign ownership right over it.' Non-agricultural refugees were to be given half an acre of homestead land and financial loans to start a life and career.<sup>34</sup>

For many East Bengali refugees, this plan threw up a lifeline, particularly in view of the unbearable living conditions in their transit camps. On 30 January 1950, Mr A.K. Ghosh, the Chief Commissioner of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, announced in Calcutta that about 17,000 to 18,000 settlers were already there, and when fully developed, the islands would absorb about 200,000.<sup>35</sup> So from January 1950, groups of Namasudra families were shipped off to the Andaman Islands.<sup>36</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika* reported in a celebratory tone that each family was being offered free passage and a generous settlement package.<sup>37</sup> But if an attractive package was being offered, it was because Andaman needed these refugees who were considered to be ideal settlers, who could colonise the land, extend agriculture and turn Andaman into a model development project. The crops they produced in a short span of time were of exemplary quality, and these products were proudly displayed in government-sponsored agricultural and industrial exhibitions.<sup>38</sup> So when the new flow of peasant refugees began to arrive, from 1952 there was a more systematic policy of selecting only the Namasudra peasants for resettlement in the Andamans.<sup>39</sup> 'We would not take the upper caste, so called bhadraloks, the scheduled castes and other labouring population were most welcome', observed an officer who selected refugees for settlement.<sup>40</sup> By the middle of the 1950s, 663 refugee families were sent off to the Andamans; another 184 families were waiting for their turn.<sup>41</sup> Soon, however, the Bengal quota was exhausted and although the state government wanted more refugees to be sent there, the GI did not agree in order to accommodate settlers from Kerala and other provinces of the Union.<sup>42</sup> This was, as Sen has argued, a calculated policy of demographic management to ease population pressure in other provinces, as well as to ensure a cosmopolitan character of the population of the Andaman Islands.<sup>43</sup>

Apart from Andaman, the government planned to make use of the agricultural expertise of the Namasudra peasants in other provinces as well, but these attempts had mixed successes. The provinces were

encouraged to take these refugees in order to extend cultivation and grow more food. About 1,000 such families were settled in the Dehradun district of Uttar Pradesh in order to develop a project of jute production.<sup>44</sup> In March 1950, a meeting in Calcutta between the governments of the four eastern states of West Bengal, Assam, Bihar, and Orissa as well as the centrally administered area of Tripura, agreed to receive quotas of refugees fixed by the central government, which would also bear the cost of transportation and rehabilitation of these refugees.<sup>45</sup> But Assam later became reluctant to take refugees from West Bengal, because—as Bimala Prasad Chaliha, the CM of Assam, made it clear at the Eastern Zonal Council meeting in Calcutta in August 1958—it had already directly received about 500,000 refugees, who were still not properly rehabilitated.<sup>46</sup> By 1960, the state had received 700,000 to 800,000 East Bengali refugees directly coming to Assam across its own borders.<sup>47</sup>

The West Bengal state government continued to harp on the ‘saturation point’ narrative and the consequent urgency to send more refugees to other states. The Governor’s speech in January 1957 once again repeated ‘the acute shortage of land in West Bengal’.<sup>48</sup> The CM reiterated the position with statistics. About 40 per cent of the camp refugees were agriculturists and so to give each family 2.5 acres of land it would require 50,000 acres. A further 20,000 acres would be required for their house building purposes. There were also 40,000 non-camp refugees who would require 100,000 acres. So, in total there was a requirement for 170,000 acres, while the government had access to only 27,000 acres. So, the refugees could not be rehabilitated in the province, they had to be settled elsewhere.<sup>49</sup>

In June 1957, the Governor’s speech in the Assembly again reiterated that the continuous flow of refugees was putting ‘a heavy strain on the economy of this state’. This time the government was more straight-talking:

The time has come when we have to recognise the basic fact that the truncated State of West Bengal with a very high density of population can no longer absorb any more refugees within its economy. There is hardly any surplus cultivable land, and such waste lands as there are cannot be made fit for the cultivation without expensive irrigation projects. It is the realisation of this stern fact that impelled the Central Government and my Government to take the decision that migrants arriving in this State after June 1954 would be resettled in large groups in other States. A survey was accordingly carried out, and about 200,000 acres of land in other States were reported to be fit for rehabilitation purposes. In pursuance of that policy about 27,000 refugees were sent to Bihar, 5,392 to Orissa and 871 to Saurashtra.<sup>50</sup>

There were other issues too that needed to be considered, like a

clash of interests between resident and migrant peasants, because in a condition of land scarcity, giving land to the migrants could mean taking it away from the residents. And this possibility the government wanted to avoid. Many opposition leaders, who were active in both refugee and *kisan* fronts, kept on expressing this concern in various meetings, and on one occasion it led to a violent clash in Bagjola (see [Chapter 5](#) for details). Ironically, this clash of interests became a justification for the government's dispersal scheme. Congress leader Tarun Kanti Ghose mentioned in the Assembly that in West Bengal, 34.5 per cent of the peasants had uneconomic holdings; and there were 624,000 landless peasants who worked as agricultural labourers. In such a condition, it was impossible to find land for the refugees.<sup>51</sup> The State Rehabilitation Minister Prafulla Chandra Sen also conveniently picked it up. We have heard from opposition leaders, he said in the Assembly in December 1959, that in our West Bengal there were seven lakh landless families and they should be given land. Everyone knew what happened in Sonarpur, Arapanch, and Bagjola areas, where opposition parties organised agitation with local resident peasants when we tried to give land to the refugees. So, rehabilitation of refugees in those areas had to be stopped.<sup>52</sup> The dispersal plan was therefore deemed to be the only logical solution.

## Alternative Plans

To the opposition parties, this unilateral decision to send refugees to other provinces was unacceptable, because the refugees themselves preferred to be rehabilitated within what they considered to be their own natural habitat—the cultural-linguistic space of West Bengal to which they had an affective sense of belonging. So, they contested the government narrative of 'saturation point' and offered alternative plans to rehabilitate these refugees within West Bengal and in the neighbouring states. As early as 1950, the Bengal Rehabilitation Organisation led by Shyama Prasad Mukherji had pointed out that there existed about 0.6 million hectares of cultivable wasteland in West Bengal which could be reclaimed to rehabilitate a large section of the East Bengali refugees. The rest could be settled in the neighbouring states of Manipur, Tripura, and Bihar. Eminent sociologist Radha Kamal Mukherjee also powerfully argued in favour of rehabilitation of these refugees in 'contiguous Bengali-speaking areas'. In his calculation, West Bengal had 1.1 million hectares of uncultivated land, Assam had 6.9 million hectares, and Bihar 2.6 million hectares, and this would be enough for the purpose.<sup>53</sup> The government chose not to pay any attention to these plans.

The opposition leaders continued to remind the government that a

refugee was not just a liability. They could be used to extend cultivation within the state of West Bengal to enhance food production at a time when the country was suffering from unprecedented food shortages. And if the land was not readily available, as units of productive labour they could be redeployed to other non-agricultural projects.<sup>54</sup> Do the refugees ‘come only with mouth and not hands, legs or brain?’—asked Bankim Mukherjee. ‘Are they all peasants and not capable of doing any other work?’ So why was there such a ‘colossal wastage’ of human resources? Why were they all being stereotyped as peasants requiring agricultural land to settle down, and why could the government not use this surplus labour in innovative projects for the development of the state?<sup>55</sup> Jyoti Basu of CPI implored the government to ‘look at them (refugees) as Bengalees’ and integrate them into the overall economy of West Bengal: ‘industrialise the State, rebuild the cottage industries of West Bengal, reclaim wastelands, etc., and thus lakhs of people can be given gainful employment.’<sup>56</sup> But the state bureaucracy and political establishment could not think beyond a land-focused solution, and as the post-1950 refugees were low caste cultivators, the state administration seemed to have been trapped in the idea of the caste-occupation continuum inherited from colonial governmentality.

The opposition leaders also knew from their local knowledge that there were thousands of acres of uncultivated land in various pockets, which could be reclaimed to rehabilitate the agriculturist refugees.<sup>57</sup> In response to the Governor’s speech in 1956, Ambika Chakrabarti of CPI told the government that a lot of cultivable land was available in Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Maldah, and Murshidabad districts where the refugees could be rehabilitated. They could also be resettled in some of the Bengali-speaking areas of the neighbouring states. But if they were sent to other regions, the government must guarantee that their education, culture, social customs, and language would be protected.<sup>58</sup> Jyoti Basu reminded the government that it had appointed a committee to explore how much surplus and fallow land was there that could be reclaimed. But even before the committee had submitted its report, the government had decided that there was no more land for the refugees in West Bengal.<sup>59</sup> If West Bengal had a scarcity of reclaimable land, asked Suresh Banerjee, how come other states had such land in abundance and would not require any investment for their development? Didn’t it sound absurd? So the government should wait for the report of the committee, which was set up two years ago.<sup>60</sup> At a press conference in March 1958, as a leader of Sara Bangla Bastuhara Sammelan, he reiterated that if reclamation of wasteland was systematically undertaken in West Bengal, then all the East Bengali refugees could be rehabilitated



within the state.<sup>61</sup>

These opposition leaders were possibly not stretching the truth too far. Sociologist Abhijit Dasgupta has told us that in 1954, a central fact-finding committee and the state rehabilitation commissioner had identified about 80,000 acres of land in West Bengal that could be used for rehabilitation of at least a large segment of the refugee population. This included evacuee properties, reclaimed land, and uncultivable waste that could be reclaimed. But no effort was really made to recover them. So, in his view, the 'state government's position regarding land scarcity was hardly tenable.'<sup>62</sup>

The most powerful intervention in this respect came from the noted scientist Dr Meghnad Saha, MP. At a press conference on 24 January 1956, he emphatically claimed that there was no strong reason to send the refugees to other states when there was enough surplus land in West Bengal, Tripura, and in the two Bengali-speaking districts of Kachar and Goalpara in Assam. In West Bengal alone, he argued, the amount of available wasteland was about 1.3 million acres, it could even be 2 million. The government had already identified 600,000 acres of land as reclaimable, and it could immediately be taken possession of and prepared for settlement. And finally, after zamindari abolition, about 130,000 acres of reclaimable wasteland in the Sunderbans and a large portion of the cultivable land in the state have come under the control of the government and were available for redistribution. So, the narrative of 'saturation point' made absolutely no sense.<sup>63</sup>

It was not that the Government of West Bengal never contemplated or tried to reclaim land to rehabilitate the refugees. In early 1949, it had set up an expert committee—known as the S.K. Dey Commission—to explore possibilities of reclaiming parts of the Sunderbans where the soil was rich in alluvial silt. It had recommended that at least 1,000 square mile areas could be reclaimed to rehabilitate at least 100,000 refugee families.<sup>64</sup> Following on this, in October 1955, it sent a proposal to the GI to colonise a part of the Sunderbans for rehabilitation purposes. It particularly identified Herobhanga Forest Block, which consisted of more than 8,000 acres of deep forestland infested with tigers and other wild animals. It was 20 miles off Canning railway station, and when cleared would rehabilitate 3,500 agriculturist and 275 non-agriculturist refugee families. Each settler family would get a piece of homestead land, and the agriculturist families would be given three acres of cultivable land in addition. The plan was to develop the project as a worksite camp so that the work of clearance and reclamation could be accomplished by using refugee labour. It would cost Rs. 560,000 and cause deforestation of 8,500 acres of forestland in the Sunderbans. It was estimated that the full

process of clearance and rehabilitation would take five to eight years. But the project was delayed because of escalating costs and complications caused by the Delhi bureaucracy, which did not give sanction to the project until 1957. A high-powered meeting in August 1958 revealed that by then only 2,700 acres had been reclaimed, and the rest of the area still remained 'unknown and unexplored' because it was still un-surveyed. By August 1958, only 550 families had been rehabilitated there.<sup>65</sup>

We mention the Herobhanga Land Settlement Scheme in detail for two reasons. It shows, first of all, the bureaucratic reluctance and delays involved in such reclamation process, particularly when money for such development plans was to come from New Delhi and the bureaucracy there wanted to economise on spending. But more importantly, it shows that to the Government of West Bengal, the forest areas of the Sunderbans were no sacred zones. It had little qualm about deforestation in the 1950s. Apart from Herobhanga, Jharkhali reserve forest was another area in the Sunderbans where the government had allowed the rehabilitation of the refugees.<sup>66</sup>

Reclamation of the Sunderbans for rehabilitation purposes was acceptable to the Leftist parties as well. On 11 August 1958, the United Central Refugee Council (UCRC) under CPI leadership submitted to the Chief Minister of West Bengal 'An alternative proposal for the rehabilitation of the camp refugees in West Bengal'. It was previously adopted at its conference in Cooper's Camp in December 1957. It lamented that no appreciable progress had been made in the Herobhanga project. It proposed the development of 100,000 acres of land in the Mechogheri area in the district of 24-Parganas and 40,000 to 50,000 acres of land in the Sunderban areas for the rehabilitation of the camp refugees.<sup>67</sup> In July 1961, Jyoti Basu again wrote to the rehabilitation minister to resettle the camp refugees in the Sunderban area through the Herobhanga Second Scheme, which had remained unfinished.<sup>68</sup> There seemed to have been also a sort of cross-party consensus on this, as in January 1964, the Gandhian leader Satish Chandra Dasgupta submitted a proposal to the Sunderban Development Board for colonisation of land for rehabilitation purposes and was given a patient hearing by the then CM, Prafulla Sen.<sup>69</sup> So, twenty years later, in 1978, when the Namasudra refugees took their own initiative to establish a settlement on the island of Marichjhanpi in the Sunderbans, they were not doing anything unprecedented or unheard of.<sup>70</sup> Herobhanga and Jharkhali were certainly there in their living memory.

## **Problem of Desertion**

These alternative plans assume more significance when we remember that the Bengali refugees who were being sent to the neighbouring states were not feeling welcome, and they were deserting these camps in thousands. And without paying any attention to their grievances, the government continued with its dispersal plan. Of these other provinces, conditions in Orissa and Bihar were particularly unpalatable for the refugees. They were accommodated in such provincial camps as Sukhinda and Amardah Camps in Orissa, and Bettiah and Purnea Camps in Bihar, where they found the infrastructures woefully inadequate, and there were no concrete plans for their permanent economic rehabilitation. Finding the situation unbearable, in October 1950, about a thousand of them came back to Howrah station and squatted at Howrah Maidan, and Sealdah stations.<sup>71</sup> According to one report, a total of 24,000 refugees were sent to Orissa, and of them, 11,000 came back. A similar number of refugees were sent to Bihar, of them 7,000 returned. Their complaints were many and similar—the camps were located in unhealthy areas, the land allotted to them was full of stones and could not be cultivated; there was scarcity of water for drinking and irrigation; there were no medical facilities and people died without medical help.<sup>72</sup> The central government had allocated sufficient funds for their rehabilitation, but that was not being spent for this purpose, they alleged. And when they returned to West Bengal, the state branded them as ‘deserters’ and refused to offer them any further relief.<sup>73</sup>

But to the refugees, relief was not an act of charity but a matter of right, and so they took to the path of agitation to claim it. From 1 March 1953, a group of refugees who had returned from Charbetia in Orissa and were staying at Sealdah station, resorted to a hunger strike in batches in front of the residence of the CM demanding rehabilitation in West Bengal.<sup>74</sup> On 18 November 1954, about 2,000 of such returnees marched to the Central Refugee Rehabilitation office on Middleton Row in Calcutta to see the central minister for rehabilitation, Mehr Chand Khanna, who was in town that day. But the police did not allow them to get into the office, and when they tried to force their entry, they were beaten up (‘lathi charged’). Twenty-seven men and four women were arrested.<sup>75</sup> A few months later in August 1955, they again tried to meet Renuka Ray, the state Minister for Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation, to tell her their grievances, but she had no time to meet them.<sup>76</sup> Again in July 1956, about 1,000 Orissa returnees belonging to 250 refugee families marched from Babughat to the central Rehabilitation office in Theatre Road and then to the Governor’s House. They could not meet the minister, but received a lathi charge from the police. For the past one and half months after returning from Bhushundipur Colony in Orissa,

they had been living in the open air and appalling conditions on both sides of the Strand Road in Calcutta.<sup>77</sup> On 8 September 1956, another group of refugees from Orissa arrived at Howrah station.<sup>78</sup> For these hapless people, private charities were the only means for survival.<sup>79</sup> At a later stage, however, their cash doles were restored at a much lower rate of Rs. 7 per month per head.<sup>80</sup> In 1958, some of the Orissa deserters were accommodated in two camps in the Bardhaman district and were also assured full rehabilitation.<sup>81</sup> Others, and a large number of them, gradually merged with the urban poor of the city of Calcutta and other mofussil towns, eking out a precarious living through brutal struggles in West Bengal's informal labour market.<sup>82</sup>

As for the refugees who were sent to Bihar, there was a mass desertion from Bettiah camp in 1956, following an attack on 18 August on the camp refugees by the local people and the authorities failing to provide them security.<sup>83</sup> The CM acknowledged that by the beginning of 1957, about 7,000 refugees who had returned from Bettiah were camping in Howrah Maidan and Sealdah railway stations.<sup>84</sup> As most of them belonged to the Namasudra caste, and the chief instigators like Sudhir Mandal and Satish Majumder were all Namasudras, the AISCF took the initiative to organise them.<sup>85</sup> But soon the Leftists under the UCRC took control of the situation. Eventually, it was a Namasudra leader Apurbalal Mazumdar, who took the leading role in organising what came to be known as the Bettiah *satyagraha* of 1957. Prafulla Chakrabarti and Swati Sengupta Chatterjee have left for us a detailed narrative of this campaign.<sup>86</sup> We may only briefly re-state that story here.

According to Chakrabarti, not seven but 15,000 refugees had deserted the Bettiah camp in Champaran district in Bihar and had been squatting in Howrah Maidan and Sealdah station areas in appalling conditions, in which six people on an average were dying every day. The UCRC sought to mobilise them and convened an action committee with leaders from all the Leftist parties. They met CM Roy, who expressed his inability to help, as the central government would not agree to give any aid to the deserters if they did not return to the camp. But Roy could not ignore their desperate plight and so, according to Chakrabarti, gave the Leftist leaders a hint to organise demonstrations to persuade the central government to change its position. So, a *satyagraha* campaign was launched at Subodh Mullick Square in Calcutta on 4 May, and it went on almost till the end of the month. But *bhadralok* Bengal showed no public sympathy towards the deserters, and the central government refused to consider their case. At this stage, the UCRC preferred to extend and expand the campaign into a wider and prolonged political movement. But Mazumdar thought that this would not help the cause of the refugees, who

needed immediate relief for survival. So, he negotiated a deal with the government: the refugees would go back to Bettiah on condition that two months' arrear payment of cash dole would be immediately made, living conditions in Bettiah would be improved, and arrangements would be made for their economic rehabilitation. On 6 June, the *satyagraha* campaign was formally withdrawn, and most of the refugees went back.

Referring to this mass desertion and the subsequent *satyagraha* campaign, Apurbalal Mazumdar later observed in the Assembly that this whole tragedy could have been easily avoided if the authorities were more sensitive towards the living conditions and the mental state of these refugees.<sup>87</sup> It was not true that they were not willing to settle outside Bengal. But the available figures showed that out of 6,642 families who were meant to be sent to Bettiah by 31 March 1958, there was provision for proper rehabilitation of only 2,798 families. This meant that 3,844 families had to live indefinitely in transit camps in totally unsatisfactory conditions because the Bihar government had no plans for their proper rehabilitation, and the West Bengal government never properly enquired about the arrangements. The promises made to the refugees in 1957 were forgotten even before they left Calcutta. Protesting against the continued unbearable conditions in the camp, the refugees threatened a non-violent civil disobedience movement; the Bihar government responded by firing bullets, killing five people on 13 May 1958. In actual terms, by July 1958, only 1,896 agriculturist and 242 non-agriculturist families had been meaningfully rehabilitated in Bettiah.<sup>88</sup>

The return of the Bettiah refugees did not mean an end to the desertion problem. Even while the government was discussing the next phase of the dispersal scheme, refugees were continually coming back from various provinces where they had been sent for rehabilitation. In May 1960, more refugees from Rajasthan came back to West Bengal, alleging that land allocated by the Rajasthan government for their rehabilitation was not fit for agriculture. They started squatting on the pavements near Sealdah station, where at a meeting on 31 May, they alleged that the other state governments were misusing the money allotted for rehabilitation and were making life so difficult that the refugees had to leave the state. On 20 June, they led a deputation to the office of the Union Rehabilitation Ministry at Theatre Road, but the minister was unavailable. The refugees, in their desperation, decided to squat on the street outside the office until the minister came and met them. At this stage, the PSP leader Dhiren Bhowmik appeared in the scene and persuaded them to return to Sealdah, promising them that he would take it up with the Minister at the state level.<sup>89</sup>

But the problem was not promptly addressed. A conference of the East Pakistan Displaced Persons in Belghoria on 4–5 July 1960, therefore, once again tried to bring to the attention of the government that ‘the displaced persons in different states outside West Bengal are being subjected to unsympathetic and discriminatory behaviour in unfamiliar environments and this has made their condition worse.’ This was the prime reason why many of them were deserting the camps.<sup>90</sup> In July 1960, more refugees returned from Orissa and joined the returnees from Rajasthan; together, about 1,154 refugees belonging to 278 families were then living in Beliaghata Road in front of the Sealdah Police Court. They formed an organisation called ‘Bibhinya Rajya Pratyagata Udbastu Parishad’ (Union of Returnee Refugees from Different States) and staged a major demonstration in Calcutta on 26 July 1960. From Beliaghata Road, they marched towards Bowbazar, where they were joined by Hemanta Basu, a Forward Bloc MLA, and other political leaders. They then proceeded towards the office of the Central Rehabilitation Ministry, where a deputation met the Deputy Secretary with their memorandum demanding rehabilitation within three or four days, and an independent enquiry into the conditions of the refugee camps in other states which they had been compelled to desert. But the ministry official advised the refugees to go back to the states where they had come from, and only then could their grievances be addressed by the Minister. Frustrated by this response, the demonstrators then proceeded towards the Writer’s Building. They were intercepted by the police near Esplanade East. Hemanta Basu then took their memorandum to the CM, who only promised to meet a delegation of the refugees at a later date. The demonstrators then dispersed peacefully without getting any assurance of rehabilitation from any of the representatives of the state.<sup>91</sup>

By the beginning of August 1960, more families returned from Orissa and the total number of refugees living at Sealdah rose to 1,348 belonging to 323 families. At another meeting on 11 August at Sealdah, chaired by Hemanta Basu, speakers expressed their frustration at the apathy of the central and the state governments, which did not even care to investigate the conditions the refugees faced in other provinces. For over five years, the refugees returning from camps in other states were living in squalid conditions at the Sealdah railway station and the government did nothing.<sup>92</sup> A year later on 24 August 1961, three of the Sealdah refugees started a hunger strike at Subodh Mullick Square; others marched towards Writer’s Building, where sixty-two of them, many of them Dalit, including four women with babies in arms, courted arrest. Yet, the government refused to move, and the general public showed no

sympathy.<sup>93</sup> At a later stage, some of these deserters were rehabilitated in rural colonies,<sup>94</sup> but that was after many years of miserable existence on the open pavements around the Sealdah station. And those who were not rehabilitated by the state simply swelled the city's informal labour market. In short, the policy of settling East Bengali peasant refugees in other provinces did not work very well for these refugees. But the government did not even investigate the conditions, let alone trying to improve them. And despite this continuous reverse flow and desperate pleas and protests of the refugees, it refused to rethink its dispersal scheme.

During all this time, the central government continued to push the scarcity of land argument in order to expedite the rehabilitation process, and the state government agreed to toe the line. The CM was convinced that dispersal was the only solution for the refugee problem, and he blamed the refugees for delaying the process. He told the opposition leaders that unlike the West Punjabis, the East Bengali refugees did not 'want to go outside Bengal, because of the ties between East Bengal and West Bengal.' He also thought that the refugees were 'a group of people who have got a psychology which is not, I may say with some amount of confidence, a normal approach to life because they have been uprooted and their approach to life has been upset by the uprooting.'<sup>95</sup> The condescending statement that sounded like victim blaming probably meant that the refugees, once displaced, did not want to be uprooted again from their cultural moorings. But such considerations were nowhere to be seen when the Dandakaranya project was announced and then ruthlessly executed.

## **Dandakaranya Project**

While the earlier phases of the dispersal scheme were clearly not working, instead of looking into the situation, the government got the final phase of this policy approved at a National Development Council meeting in June 1957. It was announced in January the following year. It was the Dandakaranya Scheme of relocating these refugees to a region consisting of 78,000 square miles of inhospitable un-irrigated land in the tribal areas of Koraput and Kalahandi districts of Orissa, and Bastar district of Madhya Pradesh.<sup>96</sup> At a later stage, it was to be extended to incorporate the adjacent territories of Andhra Pradesh as well. In November 1957, a Chief Administrator was appointed, and the Dandakaranya Development Authority (DDA) was set up on 12 September 1958.<sup>97</sup> The project was now all set to go.

It was announced that the scheme was 'conceived with the twin object of rehabilitation of displaced persons from camps in West Bengal and the advancement of the interests of the local tribal



population.’<sup>98</sup> The media endorsed the plan: the area was full of ‘untapped resources’, like timber, forest products, and mineral resources, wrote a correspondent for the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*. So, it was deemed to be a national ‘project’, the development of which would be good for the ‘future generations of India’.<sup>99</sup> The official considerations that went into the planning of this project were revealed in a press interview by Mr. A.L. Fletcher, the Chief Administrator of the Dandakaranya Colony Scheme. It was an area ‘abounded in rich mineral and forest wealth’, he pointed out, ‘not yet explored or exploited’, and therefore it was ‘selected after deep consideration’. It had the best quality iron ore in the world and several waterfalls, which could be used for producing hydroelectricity. Apart from rehabilitating the East Pakistani refugees, the project would also contribute to the welfare of the tribal population by drawing them into the national mainstream. But the area had to be made accessible through the construction of roads and other infrastructure. ‘As there was paucity of labour it had been thought to utilise the manpower to be drawn from the refugees.’<sup>100</sup> So the strategy was to kill two birds with one stone: solve the rehabilitation problem of the East Bengali refugees and implement this national development project with coerced refugee labour.

To the Bengali refugees, however, it was presented as a dream of ‘New Bengal’.<sup>101</sup> A government media campaign promised that the refugees would be associated with all development projects in the region, such as the construction of roads and buildings, manufacture of bricks and tiles, woodwork, distribution of consumer goods, dairy, construction of irrigation facilities, and reclamation of land. So, there would be plenty of employment opportunities. There would be schools and open health centres. And above all, the refugees would not be forced but persuaded to go there.<sup>102</sup> The central Rehabilitation Minister Mehr Chand Khanna assured in his speech in the Rajya Sabha on 14 March 1958 that the project would be developed in phases and the refugees would be taken there only if they wanted to go on their own ‘free will’. And in order to ensure their cultural well-being, he would appoint Bengali teachers, Bengali doctors, and Bengali social workers.<sup>103</sup> The Dandakaranya project was formally inaugurated on 5 September 1958, and when completed it was expected to cost Rs. 1 billion. But in the end, all these pledges were forgotten, the project failed to deliver the promised ‘New Bengal’, and it had to be thrust down the throats of reluctant refugees. A refugee who went to Dandakaranya in March 1959, told the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*:

on our arrival here we saw no land, no home, no job, not even a plough with which we could till the lands that lay unclaimed. Buffaloes were nowhere within our sight. We were ordered to cut trees and clear jungles.

The order was sweeping and clear. No work no bread ... the big boss concerned threatened, this is not Bengal. Then began our new life.<sup>104</sup>

Although refugee life in Dandakaranya remains outside the purview of this book, the situation raises suspicion that the project was conceptualised not primarily for rehabilitation. The refugees were seen only as units of productive labour necessary for implementing a national development project. We find corroboration of this hypothesis when we find subsequent refugee settlers complaining that whenever they tried to take any independent initiative to support themselves, such as starting a business, the authorities did not like it or encourage it. The camp officials only wanted them to stick to their allocated job of clearing forests.<sup>105</sup>

Almost immediately after the announcement of the plan, Jyoti Basu of CPI warned the government on the floor of the Legislative Assembly that if the refugees were forced to relocate to Dandakaranya, a protest movement of such massive proportions would be launched that its repercussions would not be good for the wellbeing of West Bengal.<sup>106</sup> The refugees had been hearing about the Dandakaranya project for a while and were not willing to go outside their linguistic-cultural zone when they were convinced that land could be found within West Bengal for their proper rehabilitation. When the prevailing chaos at Dandakaranya became public knowledge, a meeting in Calcutta on 21 January 1958 of the CMs of the neighbouring provinces added a new sense of urgency to the dispersal scheme. The refugees got panicky and almost forced the mainstream opposition parties to launch a massive *satyagraha* campaign in March–April 1958. We will discuss this *satyagraha* and subsequent refugee protests in greater detail in [Chapter 5](#). It will suffice here to mention that it shook public life in West Bengal in such a way that under pressure the CM gave in to assure everyone that: ‘any refugee who was unwilling to go outside the State of West Bengal will not be forced to do so and if there was any person whose cash dole has been stopped only on the ground of his unwillingness to go outside West Bengal, such dole would be restored.’<sup>107</sup> The movement was then withdrawn, although no alternative rehabilitation plan was announced.

But the government soon reneged on this promise under pressure from the central government, which was eager to wind up the rehabilitation project and close the camps as soon as possible. At a high-powered meeting in Calcutta on 3–4 July 1958—attended by the central Finance Minister Morarji Desai, Law Minister Ashok Sen, and Rehabilitation Minister Mehr Chand Khanna, along with the state Chief Minister Roy and Rehabilitation Minister Prafulla Sen—it was decided that all the remaining camp refugees would be sent to Dandakaranya by 31 July 1959, and after that date, all the camps

would be closed.<sup>108</sup> In a subsequent press statement, the central Ministry of Rehabilitation announced that 35,000 refugees still living in the camps would be served notices to go outside the state for work and rehabilitation. They would be given two months' time to decide. If they chose not to go, they would be given the equivalent of six months' cash dole and their rehabilitation would no longer be the 'responsibility' of the state.<sup>109</sup>

To reach the target less confrontationally, some former nationalist revolutionaries were appointed as 'zonal leaders'. Their responsibilities were to visit the camps, motivate and inspire the refugees to go to Dandakaranya, and screen people for this purpose, as in the initial stages the DDA preferred to have only those refugees who could provide manual labour. But later, in a rush to despatch refugees from the camps, this distinction was not maintained, and so people who arrived in Dandakaranya were from different professions and were not always capable of doing hard manual work. Until August 1959, a total of 271 families were sent to Dandakaranya, out of them, 201 were camp refugees and seventy were non-camp refugees. They came to a less than warm welcome, were greeted by bureaucratic apathy, and caught in a chaotic condition, which offered them limited opportunities for suitable employment.<sup>110</sup>

It is important to note that when in July 1959, the central government was trying to expedite the dispersal of refugees to Dandakaranya, it knew very well that the project was in disarray. Khanna himself told an official function on 13 July that the process of reclamation and road construction had been seriously delayed by the non-availability of machinery and equipment and the monsoon.<sup>111</sup> The malfunctioning of the project was also detected by a Congress fact-finding mission in August 1959, and Professor P. Chakravarti, the Permanent Secretary to the All India Congress Committee (AICC) wrote to the President of the AICC in a tone of anxiety, that for the refugees 'it was rather a very sad experience which they were made to undergo in a far off land.' He did not offer any alternative but recommended reform of the administration and proper execution of the Dandakaranya plan.<sup>112</sup> Because of these dilemmas, the state government did not push the refugees immediately towards Dandakaranya. The camps were not really closed on 31 July 1959, as skeleton services were continued, and later even doles were restored.<sup>113</sup>

But the GI was in a hurry to close the camps and settle the rehabilitation problem sooner rather than later. So, in August 1959, it decided to serve notices to 10,000 refugee families in the camps, both agriculturists and non-agriculturists. They would be given ninety days' time, within which they had to arrange rehabilitation on their own

through the *Bynagama* scheme<sup>114</sup> or go to Dandakaranya. Among those 10,000 families, at least 2,000 were to be sent every year. Now, Sen in a letter to Khanna on 31 March 1960 openly objected to the ninety days' notice period. It seemed that by this time, the Congress leaders in West Bengal had developed serious doubts about how the Dandakaranya project was unfolding. We need to quote a few passages from Sen's letter to show the differences of opinion between the state and the central governments on the Dandakaranya dispersal plan.

Logically we cannot now force people to go to Dandakaranya unless and until we are ourselves satisfied that Dandakaranya is a proper area where the displaced persons can be rehabilitated with chances of economic rehabilitation ...

... we must make Dandakaranya attractive by providing for proper supply of drinking water, by arranging for education facilities, by making adequate provision for looking after the health and health problems of displaced persons and by letting them have some idea with regard to the fertility of the soil where we are asking them to settle for ever.<sup>115</sup>

These could not be achieved within ninety days, and therefore Sen was reluctant to tell refugees to move to Dandakaranya within that timeframe and wanted the old screening procedure to be continued. This, of course, would mean 'slowing down' of the process of dispersal, but he could 'not find any alternative to it.'<sup>116</sup> But the central government did not want to slow down. At a press conference in Raipur on 3 February 1960, Khanna had told the media that already 1,200 refugee families had been settled in Dandakaranya, and another 2,000 families would be taken there within the month. Referring to the resistance, he mentioned that already Rs. 500 million had been spent on the refugee camps, and it was not advisable to spend any more money.<sup>117</sup> In a letter to former State Rehabilitation Minister Renuka Ray on 25 August 1960, the Union Finance Minister Morarji Desai made it clear that the GI wanted to proceed with the settlement of West Bengal camp refugees in Dandakaranya on a priority basis because they were causing 'infructuous drain on the public exchequer'.<sup>118</sup> So the plan was to finish the task of rehabilitation as quickly as possible and close down the Ministry of Rehabilitation by the end of 1961.<sup>119</sup>

However, while the union government wanted to expedite the process, the state government continued to delay it through its inaction and procrastination. Until the end of 1959, it had done nothing to serve these notices. On 20 December, the Central and State Rehabilitation Secretaries discovered that only 50 per cent of those who had been served notices had actually gone to Dandakaranya. So, the process had to be expedited. By January 1961, at least a thousand families had to be sent, or alternately, they would be given six

months' dole and would be asked to leave the camps. Sen finally gave in to central government pressure and agreed that by 31 December 1960, all the refugees would be served dispersal notices.<sup>120</sup> At a chief ministers' meeting in Bhubaneswar on 11 September 1960, it was acknowledged that 'the D.P.s are at least for the time being nervous about moving out of West Bengal'; but it was hoped that 'in case the D.P.s already in the Dandakaranya are comfortably and happily settled down there, there should be no difficulty in getting volunteers for movement to Dandakaranya.' So, the main mission now was 'to complete the rehabilitation of the D.P.s already there.' But at the same time, efforts would be made in West Bengal to 'persuade the D.P.s to move out to Dandakaranya'.<sup>121</sup> It was reported in the media that by early January 1961 all campers in West Bengal were served notices that they had to move to Dandakaranya and their camps would be closed by the first week of February.<sup>122</sup>

B.C. Roy was still unsure about this policy of wholesale dispersal, particularly he thought that the 2,800 non-agriculturist families belonging to artisanal groups and teachers could be absorbed in various employments within West Bengal. So, he wanted to delay their forced dispersal.<sup>123</sup> But the GI argued that Dandakaranya would offer more employment opportunities for these people, as the project urgently needed artisans like carpenters and blacksmiths; so, these people should be sent there immediately.<sup>124</sup> After this, the government speeded up the process by forcibly despatching the camp refugees to Dandakaranya. The first phase of the scheme was over in 1961. In 1965, 7,500 refugee families were settled there. This process of coerced dispersal continued; by 1973 more than 25,209 families were relocated to Dandakaranya.<sup>125</sup>

To sum up our discussion, from the very beginning, the post-1950 peasant refugees in West Bengal—most of them belonging to SCs—were seen as 'burden' for the already beleaguered economy of the province. This attitude was in sharp contrast to the social and official attitude shown towards the pre-1950 *savarna bhadralok* refugees who came with a portfolio of social and cultural capital.<sup>126</sup> So, these peasant migrants were kept in camps, segregated from mainstream society, provided minimum means of subsistence and healthcare, and eventually dispersed to other states of the Indian Union, on the questionable ground that there was no surplus land in West Bengal to resettle these agriculturists. In addition to the neighbouring states of Bihar and Orissa, which were reluctant to accept them, the refugees were sent to the development projects in Andaman and Dandakaranya, where they were seen as units of productive labour required to implement these national projects. Therefore, even before Dandakaranya was fully ready for human habitation, the refugees

were taken there to provide manual labour to develop the region for themselves as well as for the local *adivasis*—and of course, for the nation. The state government knew by 1959 that the project had failed to deliver the ‘New Bengal’ as promised, and therefore wanted to slow down the dispersal process until the area was properly ready for human settlement. But the Union Ministers, Morarji Desai and Mehr Chand Khanna did not want to wait, as the refugees were causing continuous drainage on the state exchequer. So, they wanted to finish the dispersal process as soon as possible, no matter how much cultural pain and economic distress, not to speak of physical discomfort and hazard to life, it might cause to the poor refugees. But the refugees did not leave Bengal and move to Dandakaranya without a fight. In [Chapter 5](#), we will discuss their resistance and look into the causes of the defeat of their struggle against the dispersal scheme of the Indian state.

Columns 1–2: Amount of money sanctioned by the union government to the West Bengal government.

Columns 3–4: Money actually disbursed and spent by the West Bengal government.

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion on the West Bengal government’s preparedness for this contingency, see Samir Das, ‘Refugee Crisis: Responses of the Government of West Bengal’, in Pradip Kumar Bose, ed., *Refugees in West Bengal: Institutional Processes and Contested Identities*, Kolkata, Calcutta Research Group, 2000, 7–11.

<sup>2</sup> WBLAP, 10 March 1950, 142.

<sup>3</sup> WBLAP, 10 March 1950, 143–45.

<sup>4</sup> *Jugantar*, 16 March 1950.

<sup>5</sup> *Jugantar*, 31 October 1950.

<sup>6</sup> Udit Sen, *Citizen Refugee: Forging the Indian Nation After Partition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, 86.

<sup>7</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 30 March 1950.

<sup>8</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 19 March 1950.

<sup>9</sup> Speech by Shri N.C. Chatterji (M.P.) on Rehabilitation Budget, House of the People, 30 March 1954, 2, M.N. Saha Papers, VII Instalment, Speeches/Writings by Others, S. No. 9, NMML.

<sup>10</sup> Das, ‘Refugee Crisis’, 12–14.

<sup>11</sup> WBLAP, 1 April 1960, 3.

<sup>12</sup> These were—Type Scheme, Union Board Scheme, Barujibi Scheme, and Horticulturists’ Scheme. For details, see Das, ‘Refugee Crisis’, 19–24.

<sup>13</sup> Renuka Ray to Morarji Desai, Minister of Finance, GI, 11 July 1960, Renuka Ray Papers, Subject F. No. 5, NMML.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in [Abhijit Dasgupta](#), *Displacement and Exile: The State–Refugee Relations in India*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2016, 35. Italics added.

<sup>15</sup> Speech Delivered by Renuka Ray at a Function Organised by DumDum Rajerhat Rehabilitation and Welfare Board on 7 August 1955, Renuka Ray Papers—Speeches and Writings by her, F. No. 27, NMML. Italics added.

<sup>16</sup> Morarji Desai to Renuka Ray, 25 August 1960; Renuka Ray to Morarji Desai, 29 October 1960; Renuka Ray Papers, Subject F. No. 5, NMML.

- 17 Lok Sabha Debates, 31 March 1956, 3888.
- 18 WBLAP, 12 June 1957, 338–39, 341–42.
- 19 *Swadhinata*, 3 April 1956.
- 20 WBLAP, 1 February 1956, 6.
- 21 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 5 August 1958.
- 22 WBLAP, 11 February 1956, 338–39.
- 23 WBLAP, 4 December 1959, 599; 2 March 1960, 294; 1 April 1960, 38.
- 24 ‘Draft by S. Sen’, Sukumar Sen Papers, Speeches/Writings by him, S. No. 1, NMML; *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 22 February, 19 June, 7 July 1959, 1 January 1960.
- 25 For a detailed discussion of the story of refugee settlement in the Andaman Island, see [Sen, \*Citizen Refugee\*](#).
- 26 Pethic-Lawrence to Viceroy, 11 January 1946, Weekly Letters, Secretary of State, vol. III, IOR: L/PO/10/23.
- 27 Viceroy’s Personal Report No. 9, dt. 12 June 1947, IOR: L/PO/6/123, Part 2.
- 28 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 2 January 1949.
- 29 Anwesha Sengupta, “‘They must have to go therefore, elsewhere’: Mapping the Many Displacements of Bengali Hindu Refugees from East Pakistan, 1947 to 1960s’, Public Arguments-2, Tata Institute of Social Sciences Patna Centre, 7 January 2017.
- 30 Mohanlal Saxena, *Some Reflections on the Problems of Rehabilitation*, Delhi, Progressive Publishers, n.d., 8. Italics original.
- 31 [Sen, \*Citizen Refugees\*](#), 82–88.
- 32 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 9, 10 January 1949.
- 33 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 11 January 1949.
- 34 Madhumita Mazumdar, ‘Improving Visions, Troubled Landscapes: The Legacies of Colonial Ferrargunj’, in Clare Anderson, Madhumita Mazumdar, and Vishvajit Pandya, eds., *New Histories of the Andaman Islands: Landscapes, Place and Identity in the Bay of Bengal, 1790–2012*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016, 57–58.
- 35 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 30 January 1950.
- 36 Report on the Refugee Situation for the Week Ending 22 January 1950, IB, F. No. 1838/48, Part III, WBSA.
- 37 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 26 February 1950.
- 38 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 13 April 1950.
- 39 [Sen, \*Citizen Refugees\*](#), 132–37; Kapil Krishna Thakur, ‘Dalits of East Bengal: Before and After the Partition’, in B. Chatterjee and D. Chatterjee, eds., *Dalit Lives and Dalit Visions in Eastern India*, Kolkata, Centre for Rural Resources, 2007, 33.
- 40 Quoted in Sengupta, “‘They must have to go ...’”, 9.
- 41 [Dasgupta, \*Displacement and Exile\*](#), 48, 59.
- 42 Renuka Roy, ‘And Still They Come’, in J. Bagchi and S. Dasgupta, eds., *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, vol. 1, Calcutta: Stree, 2003, 92.
- 43 [Sen, \*Citizen Refugees\*](#), 105.
- 44 [Sen, \*Citizen Refugees\*](#), 93–94.
- 45 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 15 March, 26 March 1950.
- 46 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 5 August 1958.
- 47 WBLAP, 1 April 1960. For more details on the East Bengali refugee settlement in Assam and Tripura, see Anindita Ghoshal, *Refugees, Borders and*



*Identities: Rights and Habitat in East and Northeast India*, London and New York, Routledge, 2021, 118–60, 200–43..

<sup>48</sup> WBLAP, 28 January 1957, 5.

<sup>49</sup> WBLAP, 21 March 1957, 244–45.

<sup>50</sup> WBLAP, 4 June 1957, 9.

<sup>51</sup> WBLAP, 12 June 1957, 338–39, 341–42.

<sup>52</sup> WBLAP, 4 December 1959, 600.

<sup>53</sup> Gyanesh Kudaisya, ‘Divided Landscapes, Fragmented Identities: East Bengal Refugees and Their Rehabilitation in India, 1947–79’, *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 17:1, 1996, 29.

<sup>54</sup> WBLAP, 13 March 1952, 30.

<sup>55</sup> WBLAP, 21 March 1957, 234.

<sup>56</sup> WBLAP, 5 June 1957, 67.

<sup>57</sup> WBLAP, 13 March 1952, 30, 36.

<sup>58</sup> WBLAP, 11 February 1956, 319–20.

<sup>59</sup> WBLAP, 5 June 1957, 67.

<sup>60</sup> WBLAP, 6 June 1957, 97.

<sup>61</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 16 March 1958.

<sup>62</sup> Dasgupta, *Displacement and Exile*, 52–53.

<sup>63</sup> *Swadhinata*, 25 January 1956.

<sup>64</sup> Weekly Report No. 11 for week ending 17 March 1949, IOR: L/P&J/5/320; also, *Jugantar*, 6 February 1964, cited in Jagadish Chandra Mandal, *Marichjhanpi, Udbastu: kara ebong keno?* (Marichjhanpi: Refugees: Who Are They and Why?), Kolkata, Bangadarpan Prakasan, 2005, 43–44.

<sup>65</sup> GI, Ministry of Rehabilitation, Br. Sectt., F. No. R4R14(2)/55, NAI.

<sup>66</sup> *The Statesman*, 14 May 1979, cited in Madhumoy Pal, ed., *Marichjhanpi: Chinno Desh, Chinna Itihas*, Kolkata, Gangchil, 2016, 235.

<sup>67</sup> UCRC, An Alternative Proposal: Rehabilitation of Camp Refugees in West Bengal, Memorandum Submitted to Dr B.C. Roy, Chief Minister, on 11 August 1958; K. Maudood Elahi, ‘Refugees in Dandakaranya’, *International Migration Review*, 15:1/2, Spring–Summer 1981, 223–24.

<sup>68</sup> Jhuma Sen, ‘Reconstructing Marichjhanpi: From Margins and Memories of Migrant Lives’, in Urvasi Butalia, ed., *Partition: The Long Shadow*, New Delhi, Zubaan, 2015, 107–09.

<sup>69</sup> *Jugantar*, 6 February 1964, cited in Mandal, *Marichjhanpi*, 43–44.

<sup>70</sup> Although the Marichjhanpi story of 1978–79 remains outside the main timeframe of this book, we have discussed it briefly in an Epilogue.

<sup>71</sup> Report on the refugee situation for the week ending 1 October 1950, IB, F. No. 1838/48, Part III, WBSA.

<sup>72</sup> ‘Condition of refugees in Orissa’, S.P. Mukherji Papers, Subject F. No. 34, NMML. Both Dasgupta and Anwesha Sengupta provide much higher figures for Bihar and Orissa. Dasgupta, *Displacement and Exile*, 58; Sengupta, “‘They must have to go’”, 10–11.

<sup>73</sup> Refugee Affairs, dt. 27 July 1960, IB, S. No. 78(131–136)/1927, F. No. 329/27, WBSA.

<sup>74</sup> ‘History sheet of Sri Mahadeb Bhattacharya’, IB, F. No. 96–49, Part II, WBSA.

<sup>75</sup> WBLAP, 22 August 1955, 404–5.

<sup>76</sup> WBLAP, 11 August 1955, 29–30.

<sup>77</sup> *Swadhinata*, 19 May, 12 July, 17 July, 20 August 1956.

<sup>78</sup> C.R. dt. 8 September 1956 reg. secret duty at Howrah railway station, IB,

S. No. 41/24, F. No. 95/24, WBSA.

<sup>79</sup> WBPA, 19 February 1955, IB, F. No. 1483/32, WBSA.

<sup>80</sup> WBLAP, 12 June 1957, 325.

<sup>81</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 10 August 1958.

<sup>82</sup> For more discussion on this point, see Anwesha Sengupta, 'Moveable Migrants, Laboring Lives: Making Refugees "Useful" in Post-colonial India', in Mahua Sarkar, ed., *Work Out of Place*, Oldenburg, De Gruyter, 2018, 121–48, particularly 141–45.

<sup>83</sup> Paula Banerjee and Sucharita Sengupta, 'The Refugee Movement: A Founding Moment of Popular Movement', in Ranabir Samaddar, ed., *From Popular Movements to Rebellion: The Naxalite Decade*, New Delhi, Social Science Press, 2018, 34.

<sup>84</sup> WBLAP, 22 March 1957, 305.

<sup>85</sup> See for details, Swati Sengupta Chatterjee, *West Bengal Camp Refugees: Dispersal and Caste Question 1950–1965*, Kolkata, Sreejoni, 2019, 100.

<sup>86</sup> Prafulla K. Chakrabarti, *Marginal Men: Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal*, Calcutta, Naya Udyog, 1999, 162–76; Swati Sengupta Chatterjee, 'Insights on Camp Refugees of Bettiah and Bishnupur: An Anti-dispersal Satyagraha of 1956–57', *NSOU Open Journal*, 3:1, January 2020.

<sup>87</sup> WBLAP, 5 June 1957, 120–2.

<sup>88</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 30 July 1958; Chakrabarti, *Marginal Men*, 176.

<sup>89</sup> 'F. No. 1144-60(6) Pile 270'; 'F. No. 1144-60(6) Pile 298'; Extract from SBDN dt. 2 June 1960, IB, S. No. 288/46, F. No. 820/46, WBSA.

<sup>90</sup> 'Resolution Adopted in the All India Conference of East Pakistan Displaced Persons held at Belghoria on 4th to 5th July 1960', IB, S. No. 312/39, F. No. 397/39, WBSA.

<sup>91</sup> Refugee Affairs, dt. 26 and 27 July 1960, IB, S. No. 78(131–136)/1927, F. No. 329/27, WBSA.

<sup>92</sup> Copy of a SBDN, dt. 11 August 1960, IB, S. No. 78(131–136), F. No. 329/27, WBSA.

<sup>93</sup> Refugee Affairs, In Continuation of Diary Notes, IB, S. No. 78(131–136), F. No. 329/27, WBSA.

<sup>94</sup> Dasgupta, *Displacement and Exile*, 58.

<sup>95</sup> WBLAP, 21 March 1957, 244–45.

<sup>96</sup> For more details on the project, see Gyanesh Kudaisya, 'The Demographic Upheaval of Partition: Refugees and Agricultural Resettlement in India, 1947–67', *South Asia*, vol. XVIII, Special Issue, 1995, 73–94; Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947–1967*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, 127–41.

<sup>97</sup> Alok Kumar Ghosh, 'Bengali Refugees at Dandakaranya: A Tragedy of Rehabilitation', in Pradip Kumar Bose, ed., *Refugees in West Bengal: Institutional Practices and Contested Identities*, Calcutta: Calcutta Research Group, 2001, 109.

<sup>98</sup> The quotation is from a letter from Central Rehabilitation Ministry read out in the Assembly. WBLAP, 1 April 1960, 21.

<sup>99</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 11 January 1960.

<sup>100</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 17 February 1958.

<sup>101</sup> WBLAP, 1 April 1960, 21.

<sup>102</sup> WBLAP, 1 April 1960, 47.

<sup>103</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 15 March 1958.

<sup>104</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 11 January 1960.

<sup>105</sup> Sumallya Mukhopadhyay, 'Thinking of Migration through Caste: Reading

Oral Narratives of “Displaced Person(s)” from East Pakistan (1950–1970), *Journal of Migration Affairs*, vol. II:1, September 2019, 124.

<sup>106</sup> WBLAP, 19 February 1958, 78.

<sup>107</sup> This is an excerpt from a letter sent to the Sara Bangla Bastuhara Sammelan at the end of the *satyagraha*. It was read out in the Assembly. See WBLAP, 4 December 1959, 94.

<sup>108</sup> ‘Note to the Congress President, Re. Dandakaranya Project by P. Chakravarti,’ 22 August 1959, AICC Papers (2nd Instalment), F. No. 2916, NMML.

<sup>109</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 2 August 1958.

<sup>110</sup> ‘Note to the Congress President, Re. Dandakaranya Project by P. Chakravarti, 22 August 1959, AICC Papers (2nd Instalment), F. No. 2916, NMML.

<sup>111</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 14 July, 16 July 1959.

<sup>112</sup> ‘Note to the Congress President, Re. Dandakaranya Project by P. Chakravarti,’ 22 August 1959, AICC Papers (2nd Instalment), F. No. 2916, NMML.

<sup>113</sup> WBLAP, 4 December 1959, 601.

<sup>114</sup> Under the *Bynana* scheme a refugee had to find land and directly negotiate with the owner to purchase it. Once the sale arrangement was finalised, the government would offer loan for the purchase to go ahead. But the process of approval was so complicated that not many refugees could take advantage of it. According to one report, until December 1959, the government had received 39,000 applications, out of which 16,000 were accepted, 18,000 were rejected, and 5,000 were still under consideration. WBLAP, 4 December 1959, 581–82.

<sup>115</sup> Prafulla Chandra Sen to Mehr Chand Khanna, Minister for Rehabilitation, GI, 31 March 1960, Renuka Ray Papers, Subject F. No. 5, NMML.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 4 February 1960.

<sup>118</sup> Morarji Desai to Renuka Ray, 25 August 1960, Renuka Ray Papers, Subject F. No. 5, NMML.

<sup>119</sup> WBLAP, 1 April 1960, 5.

<sup>120</sup> WBLAP, 1 April 1960, 26–29.

<sup>121</sup> ‘Suggested Agenda for the Chief Ministers’ meeting at Bhubaneswar on 11 September 1960’, Sukumar Sen Papers, Subject F. No. 23, NMML.

<sup>122</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 7 January, 10 January 1961.

<sup>123</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 11 January 1961.

<sup>124</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 12 January 1961.

<sup>125</sup> Report of the Ministry of Rehabilitation, GI, New Delhi, 1961, 70; T.Y. Tan and G. Kudaisya, *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia*, London and New York, Routledge, 2000, 151–52.

<sup>126</sup> However, as we have mentioned in [Chapter 3](#), they too suffered immeasurably as the state failed to keep its promises on time.

## 5 Politics and Resistance

### Politics

The East Bengali peasant refugees' opposition to the Dandakaranya plan emanated from an expectation that they would be rehabilitated in West Bengal, their own linguistic-cultural zone to which they had a natural sense of belonging after leaving their original homeland. They were prepared to go to the neighbouring states, if infrastructural facilities were better, and the attitudes of the local governments were more welcoming. But Dandakaranya was simply unacceptable—it was a foreign land—‘a place of banishment’.<sup>1</sup> For generations, they had lived in the marshy *bil* tracts of East Bengal, colonising the land, which ensured their emergence as a settled peasant community. The ecology of this wetland in the delta of the Bay of Bengal, where for years they maintained almost a semi-amphibious existence, historically defined their sense of identity as a community of pioneer cultivators (see [Chapter 1](#)). They could not simply think of surviving in the dry lands of Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. As Anadi Mondal of Chamta camp in Nadia put it: ‘We are people from an area with water. How could we live in that rocky area?’<sup>2</sup> So the Indian state's policy of settling them in Dandakaranya (discussed in [Chapter 4](#)) threatened them with the prospect of a second displacement, and this time they decided to resist it fiercely—initially at the camp level, through locally organised protest demonstrations. But the protests did not remain localised, as refugee camps were never in any sense politically segregated ‘spaces of exception’, and hence, gradually such movements spread beyond the camps and were mobilised at a provincial level under large umbrella-type organisations. The first organisation that projected refugee demands was the Nikhil Vanga Bastuhara Karma Parishad, politically a rainbow organisation, that was established in 1948 with representations from a variety of political parties from right to left. But by 1950, it declined due to internal ideological rifts.<sup>3</sup> In the 1950s, emerged other organisations, such as the United Central Refugee Council (UCRC) and the Sara Bangla Bastuhara Sammelan (SBBS) [All Bengal Refugee Association]. We come across numerous reports of meetings and demonstrations of refugees taking place from 1953 onwards in Calcutta and district

headquarters under the auspices of these two organisations.<sup>4</sup>

But more importantly, such organisations were gradually coming under the influence of mainstream political parties, which began to look at these unending streams of refugees as their future voters. If we look across the political spectrum, on the right, the Hindu Mahasabha, Jan Sangh, and the RSS from 1949 were making inroads into the camps, seeking to mobilise the refugees. As a strategy, they criticised the government's 'appeasement policy' towards Pakistan and advocated economic sanctions as a solution to the problems of East Bengal's Hindu minorities. At the centre, the Praja Socialist Party (PSP) started actively organising the refugees and came to dominate the SBBS.<sup>5</sup> On the left, the Communist Party of India (CPI) by 1951 took control of the UCRC. The other minor refugee organisations on the left were the Bastuhara Kalyan Parishad (Refugee Welfare Society) controlled by the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI) and the East Bengal Relief Committee run by the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP).

Of all the organisations, possibly the UCRC and the Leftist political parties that worked under its umbrella first overtly began to use the refugee movement for wider political constituency building. It was established on 4 June 1950, and from its early days in refugee meetings, its leaders Ambika Chakrabarti of CPI, Jiban Lal Chatterjee, and Satya Priya Banerjee of Forward Bloc were talking candidly about consolidating all Leftist forces to overthrow the current Congress government.<sup>6</sup> In the first election of 1952, the UCRC openly courted the support of the refugees in favour of CPI candidates.<sup>7</sup> However, until 1952–53 the UCRC was mainly working among the colony refugees, i.e. the refugees who had arrived in the first wave and had settled down in about 150 squatter colonies in and around Calcutta. In various refugee conventions, the CPI leaders of the UCRC, like Ambika Chakarabarti, Prankrishna Chakrabarti, and Anil Singh, were demanding regularisation of the squatter colonies, withdrawal of the eviction bill and the eviction notices served against many refugees in these colonies. Together with that, resolutions were also passed recommending the end of the Congress government and condoling the death of Marshal Stalin.<sup>8</sup>

A police intelligence report suggests that from around August 1950, the CPI was actively trying to mobilise the refugees in Chandmari, Halishahar, Gaushala, and Gayeshpur camps, with varying degrees of success.<sup>9</sup> From around 1953, the UCRC more vigorously started mobilising the camp refugees and we have already noted its increased activities in Cooper's camp around this time (see [Chapter 3](#)). At a meeting in Siliguri on 1 July 1954, it made a fervent appeal to the camp refugees to unite under its umbrella for the fulfilment of their

demands for rehabilitation.<sup>10</sup> On 22 August 1954, at a refugee meeting at Calcutta Maidan, the UCRC leaders spoke about the 'misdeeds, oppression, and corruption of the Congress government'.<sup>11</sup> The endeavour to mobilise electoral support among the refugees to oust the Congress government continued throughout the year of 1954. In November, there were several meetings of camp refugees in Calcutta organised by the UCRC where the Congress government and its rehabilitation policies were criticised. Then, at its meeting on 15 November 1954, the General Council of the UCRC decided to focus more on building district organisations.<sup>12</sup>

By 1955–56, the UCRC's organisational presence in different refugee camps was more firmly entrenched, and electoral aspirations remained a motivating factor. We came across at least three reports of refugee meetings in 1956—two in Cooper's camp in June and July, and the other a conference of the West Bengal camp refugees in Rajarhat (24-Parganas) in June—where formal resolutions were passed urging the refugees to register as voters to exercise their franchise in favour of the Leftist candidates.<sup>13</sup> As the election of 1957 approached, in various refugee meetings, the UCRC speakers directly appealed to their audiences to vote for CPI.<sup>14</sup> As mentioned in [Chapter 3](#), according to Article 6 of the Constitution of India, anyone who migrated from Pakistan after 19 July 1948 could get Indian citizenship; but they had to stay in India for at least six months and then register themselves with an appropriate authority. So, by asking the refugees to register as citizens and voters, the Leftists were no doubt urging them to claim their legitimate right of citizenship. But behind this concern for democratic rights, electoral interests remained a strong motivating factor.

But then, CPI was not alone in this political space. In 1950, in refugee meetings in Calcutta, the PSP leaders were also demanding citizen's rights for the refugees, so that they could vote in the coming election.<sup>15</sup> From around mid-1950, other Leftist parties like RCPI and RSP were also active in mobilising the refugees in various camps.<sup>16</sup> By 1951, the RSP leader Sovamoy Sur was busy in organising the refugees in Bardhaman district for electoral purposes.<sup>17</sup> We have a report from 1956 of the minor Leftist parties like Socialist Unity Centre, RCPI, and Republican Party holding a meeting at Calcutta Maidan under the banner of 'West Bengal United Leftist Front', where slogans were raised for removing the Congress government in the coming election and installing a true Leftist government. Interestingly, a festoon of the Bagjola refugee peasants' organisation was also seen at that meeting.<sup>18</sup> On the right, the Hindu Mahasabha leader Jyotish Ray was both mobilising the refugees and participating in electioneering campaign throughout the period of 1950–52.<sup>19</sup> In late

1952, they organised several meetings in Calcutta, where the Nehruvian government was criticised for appeasing Pakistan, for not offering a political solution to the minorities problem and not coming up with a reasonable rehabilitation package for the refugees in the east.<sup>20</sup> On the eve of the election of 1957, the Hindu Mahasabha opened several sub-offices in refugee concentrated areas of Nadia to organise the election campaign in support of its candidate N.C. Chatterjee. The Hindu leader who once tried to stop Namasudra peasant migration from East Bengal (see [Chapter 2](#)), now solicited their votes.<sup>21</sup> This was again repeated before the 1963 election when Chatterjee extensively toured in the refugee colonies of Hooghly and Nadia, trying to tap into the refugee base for votes.<sup>22</sup>

But mobilising the refugees was not always a straightforward affair for the established politicians. When it came to the issue of rehabilitation, the Leftist leaders particularly had to deal with a serious conflict of interest. Many of the CPI leaders involved in the refugee front were also active in the Kisan Sabha movement, and the interests of the resident peasants were seemingly at odds with the requirements of rehabilitation of the migrant peasants (see [Chapter 4](#)). On the one hand, leaders like Prankrishna Chakrabarti or Satya Priya Banerjee kept telling the refugees that there was enough land in West Bengal to rehabilitate them in this province, and that the Congress government was avoiding that solution only to shield private landowning interests under their protective umbrella.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, CPI leaders like Ambika Chakrabarti and Renu Chakrabarti (both were also active on the refugee front) were speaking at Kisan meetings exhorting their audiences to unite and launch agitation against the acquisition of land by the government in Baruipur–Sonarpur areas of 24-Parganas for the purposes of rehabilitation.<sup>24</sup> Kisan Sabha leader Harekrishna Konar was demanding that land should be even-handedly distributed among both resident and refugee peasants. The implications of this demand were made more explicit at a meeting in Baruipur in April 1957, when Renu Chakrabarti reminded the government that there were enough lands belonging to the *zamindars* and *jotedars* in West Bengal for rehabilitation. The government was not acquiring those lands and instead acquiring lands of local peasants so that there was a clash between the locals and refugees.<sup>25</sup> The complaint about taking land from the resident peasants instead of the zamindar–jotedar class for rehabilitating refugees was a recurrent theme in peasant rallies and refugee meetings addressed by the CPI leaders.<sup>26</sup> On 10 April 1956, there was actually a protest march in Basirhat by 2,000 peasants who walked to see the Sub-divisional Officer to let him know of their complaint against the practice of settling refugees in land taken away from



sharecroppers, middle class landowners and Muslim peasants.<sup>27</sup>

To mitigate social conflict between resident and migrant peasants, since 1953 the Krishak conferences started raising slogans like '*Krishak bastuhara ek hao*' (peasants and refugees unite).<sup>28</sup> Leaders like Prankrishna Chakrabarti, who was active in both Kisan and refugee fronts, tried to convene joint meetings of peasants and refugees. There is a report of one such meeting he convened on 18–19 May 1956 in Haroa in Basirhat, where the government policy of confiscating land from the resident peasants for rehabilitation purposes was condemned.<sup>29</sup> Other Leftist parties like Forward Bloc also held joint meetings of refugees and kisans, addressed by Dalit leaders like Apurbalal Mazumdar, who spoke of the need for joint state-wide agitation of the two groups.<sup>30</sup>

But sometimes this clash of interests resulted in violent fracas between the two groups of peasants, as it happened in Bagjola area in the district of 24-Parganas. From around 1953, the CPI leaders were organising petitions by resident peasants of this area against the acquisition of land for the purposes of refugee rehabilitation.<sup>31</sup> From 1954 Ambika Chakrabarti and Renu Chakarabarti started mobilising the local peasants especially against the Bagjola canal scheme, which was the main source of occupation for the refugees at Bagjola worksite camp. Protest against the canal scheme continued, as at another meeting on 26 June 1956, held under the auspices of the Bhangar Thana Krishak Samiti, CPI leaders Renu Chakrabarti, and Abdul Rezzak Khan talked about peasant suffering caused by the scheme.<sup>32</sup> As a result, tension between local peasants and camp refugees went on escalating, ultimately bursting into a violent clash in 1960 resulting in several deaths (see the section on Broken Promises and Radicalism

for more details of this conflict).<sup>33</sup>

However, there was one thing that the mainstream politicians on both sides of the political spectrum wanted to ensure—they preferred to play a mediating role to keep the refugee movement disciplined and under control. They acted as intermediaries between the refugees and the government, led the protest marches, organised deputations to meet the ministers and raised the refugee issues on the floor of the Legislative Assembly. And then, when the uncertainty about rehabilitation and the resulting tension began to mount in the refugee camps from 1955, they implored the refugees to abide by the rules and depend on the members of the legislature to mediate on their behalf. They were to resolve their problems in unity with the people of West Bengal.<sup>34</sup> From the beginning of 1956 the tension between refugee radicalism and the requirements of mainstream politics for peace and order became apparent to these leaders. When the refugees became restive in January 1956 in Palla and the adjoining worksite

camps in Bardhaman district, the political leaders implored them to conduct their movement in peaceful and 'constitutional' way, not to launch a hunger strike as they had planned, and have faith in their MPs and MLAs who would represent their grievances to the government ministers.<sup>35</sup> However, the moment of reckoning came in November 1957 when at a conference in Darjeeling, the government decided to close all refugee camps, stop their cash doles, and forcibly send the refugees to Dandakaranya. The political parties in opposition now had no other option but to start a more radical movement involving direct action.<sup>36</sup> Contrary to government allegation that the refugees were used and manipulated by the Leftist political parties to oppose dispersal policy of the state,<sup>37</sup> we will argue that it was the refugees who were calling the shots, although they were also being restrained from time to time by the mainstream politicians.

The Dalit camp refugees had to accept this moderating influence because they also needed the support and mediation of the outside political agencies to launch such a movement on a larger provincial scale. Their community leaders, who could be instrumental in any such mobilising effort, were divided on the issue of dispersal. As a Congress leader, P.R. Thakur was indeed encouraging the Namasudra refugees to move to other parts of India where they would get land to resettle. In the Legislative Assembly he on the one hand pronounced loudly his loyalty to Congress: 'It is my Congress. With all its faults I love it.' Congress, he said, 'whatever you have done is enough'.<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, he expressed his faith in the effectiveness of the government rehabilitation plan. The Namasudra pioneer cultivators had in the past reclaimed the marshy tracts of east Bengal and the forestlands of the Sunderbans, he argued. So, if they could get vacant land, they could build a 'new Bengal' in Andaman Island or in Dandakaranya. According to one report, he personally visited refugee camps and persuaded the Dalit refugees to move to Andaman.<sup>39</sup> So in 1958 he attacked the communists for misguiding and manipulating the refugees for political reasons, and often forcing them not to go to Dandakaranya against their best interests.<sup>40</sup> Of course, he had not visited Dandakaranya and had no idea of the extreme unfertile nature of the soil and non-availability of infrastructure in the region. In other words, he became a champion of the scheme of geographical dispersal of the community, which the Congress government of the time was blamed for. His political support for the Dandakaranya Scheme did not endear him to the camp refugees, but there was also a space for ambivalence and ambiguity. In a group meeting with the Bagjola camp refugees, one of them proudly declared that 95 per cent of the residents of their camp were Matuas, yet they did not like Thakur's support for the Dandakaranya scheme—thus making a clear

distinction between the political leader and the religious guru.<sup>41</sup> For their political struggle against the dispersal scheme they obviously needed a different leader.

Jogendranath Mandal, on the other hand, found among the refugees a new support base to reinvent his political career as a refugee leader. But he could not function in an entirely autonomous way and needed political allies. He initially became a member of the SBBS but was not averse to work with the UCRC as well. His relationship with the latter began to deteriorate from late 1957, as he was not invited to its meetings, which his followers in places like Cooper's camp did not like.<sup>42</sup> So from the early months of 1958 he moved closer to the SBBS, mobilising the camp refugees in the districts of 24-Parganas, Nadia, Murshidabad, Howrah, Bardhaman and Birbhum, preparing them for a civil disobedience campaign against the Dandakaranya scheme.<sup>43</sup> But it was not an easy task for him as his past came to haunt him. The new historical narrative of Partition normalised by the Indian state under a Congress government had erased the memory that it was Mandal who had worked for united Bengal, while it was Congress–Mahasabha duo, which had demanded Partition. So, in various meetings Mandal was criticised for his closeness to the Muslim League, holding him responsible for the Partition. And the attacks came not just from the Congress, but also from the Left, for both loathed his influence over the camp refugees. The situation pushed Mandal closer to the SBBS and when in March 1958 the latter formally launched its campaign against the Dandakaranya scheme it relied heavily on Mandal and his influence among the Namasudra camp refugees.

## Resistance

The resistance of the camp refugees to the dispersal scheme began through grassroots initiative in Basudebpur and Siromonipur camps in the Bankura district. In December 1957, some inmates were served notice to move to Rajasthan and when they refused to oblige, their doles were stopped. The resistance started with meetings and protest marches and then involved a raid on the police kitchen, an attempt to loot the camp ration store, and an attack on the SDO's bungalow. When the movement was getting out of control, the UCRC leaders, Prankrishna Chakrabarti and Ambika Chakrabarti intervened, organised a more disciplined *satyagraha* in Bishnupur and held a mammoth protest meeting in Calcutta in March 1958.<sup>44</sup> But before this UCRC-led movement could gain further traction, the Dandakaranya scheme and the massive *satyagraha* campaigns that the SBBS and UCRC launched against it took the centre stage.

The SBBS started planning for an anti-Dandakaranya *satyagraha* campaign at its Third Annual Conference held at Bagjola camp on 11–12 January 1958. The meeting chalked out a programme to organise a mass deputation to the Assembly House or Writer's Building in Calcutta on 5 February demanding proper economic rehabilitation of East Bengali refugees and to start 'direct action' from March if no concrete action was taken by the government by that time.<sup>45</sup> A sense of urgency was added to the context when on 21 January, the chief ministers of the neighbouring provinces met at the office of the Union Rehabilitation Department at 8 Theatre Road in Calcutta to finalise their refugee dispersal scheme. Hundreds of camp refugees, including women and children, came to Calcutta to ventilate their grievances, but could not get the dispersal plan changed.<sup>46</sup> The SBBS meeting, as previously planned, was held on 5 February at Subodh Mullick Square in Calcutta, where a memorandum to the Bengal CM was drawn up, demanding the abandonment of the Dandakaranya plan. The meeting was attended by 2,500 people, including 500 women, many of them attending with their babies. It was addressed by Namasudra leaders like Jogendranath Mandal and Hemanta Biswas, as well as mainstream leaders like Haridas Mitra (MLA), Mahadeb Bhattacharya, and Sibnath Banerjee. Both Biswas and Mandal were belligerent in their utterances. Biswas complained about the apathetic attitude of the government, while Mandal alleging that the Congress had reneged on a promise to look after the East Bengali refugees. Both threatened to bring down the government if they were sent outside the province. Following the meeting, a ten-member delegation headed by Haridas Mitra and Mandal, and including other PSP leaders, went to the Writer's Buildings in a police car to hand over the memorandum, but the CM would not meet them until 11 February. The refugee leaders warned him that if their demands were not met by March, a major mass protest movement would be launched, involving 'direct action'.<sup>47</sup>

In two other meetings held at the PSP office in Calcutta on 25 February and 8 March, the final blueprint for the *satyagraha* campaign was drawn. It was to start on 17 March, when refugee volunteers would violate the prohibitory orders under section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC), and the movement would be simultaneously launched in Calcutta and in the districts in front of local courts.<sup>48</sup> Elaborate arrangements were made to make this movement a success. With the refugees of the Bardhaman district, a meeting was held on 19 February with Hemanta Biswas in the chair and Mandal as the chief speaker. Here, an Action Committee was formed with Biswas as President and one representative from each camp in the district as members. Mandal suggested that at least 1,000 volunteers from the district should participate in the campaign, and each camp should

appoint someone as Captain to mobilise support within the camp. The meeting also approved the appointment of Sushila Bala Prachanda as Commander of women volunteers, her name being proposed by her husband. Each family was also urged to contribute eight *annas* towards the campaign fund.<sup>49</sup>

On 14 March, 1,000 male refugees from Palla, Chanchai and Maheshdanga camps commenced a foot march via G.T. Road towards Calcutta. On 17 March, they would meet 300 female refugees who would travel by train with tickets. Every group of fifty women volunteers would be escorted by four men, while young babies would be left at the camp in the care of other camp members. Mandal would meet them all at Sealdah station.<sup>50</sup> At another preparatory meeting on 15 March, at Jagatpur Refugee Market in Rajarhat, Hemanta Biswas asked the refugees of the Bagjola camps to organise *sangram* committees in each camp and raise funds and volunteers to participate in the forthcoming *satyagraha*. He further suggested that in case the government stopped the doles of the families who would participate in the movement, the refugees would not hesitate to raid the government warehouses.<sup>51</sup>

So, the preparations were made, tempers were high, and the movement was finally launched on 17 March 1958. About 4,000 to 5,000 refugees from camps in Bardhaman, Howrah, and Hooghly districts had arrived in Calcutta the previous day. On 17 March, they were joined by several thousands from camps in the 24-Parganas and Nadia, and all congregated at Subodh Mullick Square, where Mandal announced that he would fight to the end in order to frustrate the rehabilitation policy of the government. The refugees would not leave the state, he declared—they would continue to survive by plundering and pilferage, if necessary. From Subodh Mullick Square, the crowd proceeded to the Esplanade area to offer *satyagraha*. The police resorted to a novel method of dealing with the demonstrators: they were arrested and transported in buses to places miles away from the city, where they were abandoned in the middle of nowhere and they had to return on foot to their camps. To discuss this situation, the SBBS leaders had a nocturnal planning meeting on 17 March, where Mandal suggested that if the government resorted to such nefarious methods to deal with the agitators, the latter too had the right to resort to violence. But Sibnath Banerjee intervened to restrain his radicalism and recommended that the movement must remain peaceful despite all provocations from the government. It was decided that the following day, about 2,000 refugees would court arrest under the leadership of Mandal.<sup>52</sup>

On 18 March, Mandal with more than a thousand followers was arrested under the Preventive Detention Act. But this only meant the

beginning of a protracted movement. Henceforth, everyday hundreds of refugees would travel ticketless to Calcutta, congregate at Subodh Mullick Square, and stage *satyagraha* at Esplanade East. At this stage, they also contemplated to forge broader alliances with the trade unions and the Muslim organisations.<sup>53</sup> The tension spread to the districts, particularly when the refugees from Palla and Chanchai camps agitated at the Bardhaman court compound on 24 March and were beaten up ('lathi charged') by the police. Leaders like Sibnath Banerjee and Mahadeb Bhattacharjee rushed to Bardhaman to tell the refugees to remain peaceful and avoid any clashes with the police.<sup>54</sup> On 27 March, there was another big meeting at Subodh Mullick Square where Banerjee and Bhattacharjee condemned police atrocities against refugees at Bardhaman, Ghusuri, Bagjola, and Ranaghat camps. But while these mainstream political leaders pleaded for restraint, the Namasudra refugee leader Hemanta Biswas threatened the government with consequences if their demands were not met and warned that 67,000 refugees were prepared for action. Their movement would undergo a complete change if police unleashed violence, he warned. Indeed, he told the meeting that their demands would never be met until they faced bullets. Later, 1,036 refugees including nineteen women, seven of them with babies in arms, broke through the police cordon and were picked up by the police, later to be released at a desolate place.<sup>55</sup>

In the following days, the movement led by the SBBS spread to the districts of Medinipur, 24-Parganas, Nadia, Murshidabad, Howrah, Hooghly, and Bardhaman, where *satyagraha* was offered in front of district and sub-divisional courts. It clearly began to show signs of desperation and radicalisation, when leaders like Sibnath Banerjee frantically urged them to remain peaceful.<sup>56</sup> The leadership also felt the political pressure to escalate the movement as the government continued to ignore them. So, on 30 March, they held a convention in Calcutta and chalked out a more elaborate campaign plan, which would be launched on 1 April, followed by a 'Women Refugee Day' on 3 April. The movement would reach its crescendo on 7 April when 4,000 to 5,000 refugees would be squatting at the Esplanade East and five to ten refugees would start a hunger strike at Subodh Mullick Square. The situation would be reviewed at a further convention on 13 April and if the government still did not concede their demand of abandoning the Dandakaranya plan, a decision to forcibly occupy government land in West Bengal would be considered. Following the convention on 30 March, there were violent clashes in Bardhaman, Ranaghat, Murshidabad, and Bagjola, where police parties were attacked by the refugees.<sup>57</sup>

The second phase of the *satyagraha* campaign started on 1 April

1958 as planned. On that day, police arrested the volunteers, and when they were about to be released at night near the Victoria Memorial Hall, the refugees protested and were subjected to lathi charge.<sup>58</sup> On 3 April, the Women's Refugee Day was observed at Subodh Mullick Square, where about 600 refugees, a large number of them women, came from Bagjola, Sonarpur, Ranaghat, Ghusuri, and other camps. The meeting was addressed by Ms Kanak Prabha Dutta of PSP and by two other prominent female Dalit refugee leaders from camps—Ms Kusum Kumari Dasi of Sealdah and Ms Nitubala Mandal of Ghusuri camp. The meeting decided that on 7 April some of them would start the hunger strike till death unless the government accepted their charter of demands. Hamanta Biswas in his speech urged the refugees to come on 7 April in large numbers, equipped with bedding, and food to last for at least two days for the purpose of squatting. He also indicated that other parties might join them as well in this movement.<sup>59</sup>

This escalation of the SBBS movement was possibly in response to the UCRC initiative to launch an anti-Dandakaranya movement at this stage. Following the Darjeeling meeting, the UCRC had its fourth Annual Conference at Cooper's camp on 7–9 December 1957, where leaders like Amritendu Mukherjee, Ambika Chakrabarti, and Prankrishna Chakrabarti, as well as the local refugee leader Gaur Kundu condemned the 'impractical and unscientific scheme' of refugee rehabilitation that the Congress government had announced.<sup>60</sup> A few months later, on 30 March 1958 (interestingly, the same day when SBBS also met to decide its campaign plan), the General Council of the UCRC decided that it too would launch a movement in Dalhousie Square in Calcutta on 7 April. They would mobilise close to 20,000 refugees, with an estimated 2,500 volunteers actually breaking the police cordon. It authorised Hemanta Basu and Ambika Chakrabarti to negotiate with the SBBS for co-ordinated action, although there was little hope of PSP or RSP leaders of the SBBS being willing to collaborate with the CPI. Prafulla Chakrabarti has argued that this failure to unite greatly weakened the *satyagraha* campaign and damaged the cause of the refugees.<sup>61</sup> As a result, both organisations mobilised their supporters on the streets of Calcutta at the same time, but in parallel formations, to protest the Dandakaranya plan. The situation was sufficiently volatile to force Chief Minister Roy to announce a concession—he proposed not to send anyone to Dandakaranya without consent and agreed to restore cash doles.<sup>62</sup> The Governor appealed in the Assembly: 'My Chief Minister has declared categorically that no refugee would be sent outside West Bengal against his will for resettlement. There seems, therefore, no reason for continuing such agitation.'<sup>63</sup> But there was no announcement of any



alternative rehabilitation plan. Roy only suggested that the *Bynagama* scheme, the agro-industrial scheme, and regularisation of exchanged properties were under active consideration of the cabinet.<sup>64</sup>

But despite the ambiguities in the government announcement, the UCRC decided to withdraw its campaign but waited for the SBBS to take a decision simultaneously. The SBBS took more time to make those vague promises palatable to their followers. At a meeting at Subodh Mullick Square on 15 April, Sibnath Banerjee told his followers that he was delighted to see that the government had accepted ‘*half* of their demands’, and the rest would be realised through continuous movement.<sup>65</sup> The following day (16 April) he rushed to DumDum Central Jail to tell the imprisoned leaders that the UCRC was in favour of withdrawal, but waited for a decision from the SBBS so that both organisations could announce the withdrawal on the same day. So these leaders agreed to discontinue the movement on 17 April if the other leaders in Presidency Jail endorsed that decision as well.<sup>66</sup> In the afternoon that day (16 April) at a public meeting, Sibnath Banerjee announced that the movement might be called off as the CM had ‘agreed to fulfil *most* of their demands’. To assure the camp refugees, Samar Guha told them that the movement would only be kept in abeyance for the time being and could be renewed if the government reneged on its promises.<sup>67</sup>

But on 17 April, when the SBBS leaders were about to announce the withdrawal of the movement at a public meeting in Subodh Mullick Square, Dalit refugee leaders from the camps—Ashim Mazumdar, Mahendranath Biswas, Anil Barman, and Sashikanta Bala—vehemently demanded that the movement must be continued until all their demands were met. Sibnath Banerjee intervened at this point to request the camp leaders to meet at the PSP office in the evening to discuss the future course of action.<sup>68</sup> We do not know what happened at that meeting. We know that the following day (18 April) at Subodh Mullick Square, the SBBS leaders Sibnath Banerjee and Prabhat Mukherjee announced that the government had ‘agreed to fulfil *three fourth* (sic) of their demands’ and therefore they pleaded for the withdrawal of the movement. If necessary, it could be re-launched at a later date. The local leaders from the camps were visibly unhappy, but agreed to the decision for the sake of unity.<sup>69</sup> The *satyagraha* campaign was formally withdrawn on 20 April. The way in the course of three days, the SBBS leaders changed their rhetoric—with the government fulfilling ‘half’, ‘most’, and then ‘three fourth’ of the demands—it is clear that they were eager to withdraw the movement, given the overt signs of radicalism and autonomy that the refugees had started to display.

In these parallel *satyagraha* campaigns of March–April 1958, about

30,000 refugees were arrested. Most of them were camp refugees and nearly 70 per cent of them were Namasudras. It remained a movement of the Dalit camp refugees, as the higher caste Hindu refugees from the squatter colonies of Calcutta refused to join them. But the most important aspect of this *satyagraha* campaign of 1958 was the emergence of a Dalit refugee leadership.<sup>70</sup> These leaders showed remarkable assertiveness and agency, but in the end found themselves helplessly dependent on the outside political leaders, whose role was to restrain them. It was this restiveness among the refugees that made the mainstream political parties extremely uncomfortable, and this possibly led to the withdrawal of the movement at the sight of a minor concession.

## Broken Promises and Radicalism

The subsequent developments again precipitated a crisis for the mainstream political leaders seeking to harness refugee people's power in the interest of their own political constituency building. The West Bengal government soon reneged on its promise, as at a high-powered meeting in the first week of July 1958, it was decided that only 10,000 families would be rehabilitated in West Bengal, while the rest would be sent outside the state, and that all refugee camps would be closed by 31 July 1959 (see [Chapter 4](#)). Because of this decision, the UCRC decided to renew agitations and organised a convention of camp refugees on 5–6 July 1958 at Ashrafabad camp in Habra in the 24-Parganas. It was decided that a 'Protest Day' against this decision would be observed on 20 July. On that day, a public meeting was held at Subodh Mullick Square, where processions carrying black flags from various refugee camps converged. Following this, another conference was held on 27–28 July at Lalkuthi in Halishahar in the 24-Parganas, where several refugee demands were outlined—such as the development of all refugee colonies, early disbursement of house building loans, construction of latrines, schools, and hospitals in refugee camps, and finally, rehabilitation of all refugees within West Bengal. It was decided that in support of those demands, a 'Demand Week' would be observed between 25 and 31 August, when several meetings would be held in Calcutta and the camps. The UCRC also submitted a memorandum to the CM containing an alternative rehabilitation plan for utilising wastelands in the state of West Bengal (see [Chapter 4](#)). Finally, on 27–28 September at a Special Conference at Bapujinagar, Jadavpur, the UCRC resolved that a mass rally would be held in Calcutta on 2 November 1958, following which 'direct action in the shape of mass satyagraha' would be launched on 14 November.<sup>71</sup>

In camp meetings, the UCRC leaders now began to argue that there was a deep-seated conspiracy behind the Dandakaranya plan to disperse the refugees, as they were known to be 'leftist minded'. The plan was therefore to be resisted peacefully and not through any revolutionary movement.<sup>72</sup> There was a flurry of activities in July–August 1958 in Cooper's, Dhubulia, Champta, and Pallisree camps in Nadia district, where local 'Councils of Action' were formed under local camp leaders like Jatin Saha, Ratish Mullick, and Gaur Kundu. And the police were also prepared to arrest them under the Preventive Detention Act.<sup>73</sup> But ultimately, despite such local enthusiasm, the UCRC leadership did not feel confident enough to launch a large-scale movement at this stage.

It was decided that the start date of 'direct action' would be deferred to negotiate with other refugee organisations to form a joint front. But despite their best efforts, no other organisation was willing to give them a helping hand, as all these groups were keen to maintain control over their own constituencies. The East Bengal Relief Committee led by RSP had accepted the Dandakaranya plan, and so there was no question of their joining the movement. The SBBS leadership was divided on the question of collaborating with the UCRC and decided to launch their own movement separately. Jogendeanath Mandal had by now established the East India Refugee Council (EIRC) with Hindu Mahasabha leader N.C. Chatterjee as its President. Although he was not totally averse to a joint front despite some reservations, and even attended a meeting of the UCRC at Indian Association Hall on 8 November 1958, his right-wing colleagues were probably not so keen to give the Leftists any access to their own turf. Instead, they decided to launch their own movement on 12 January 1959.<sup>74</sup> On the other hand, the middle-class Bengali *bhadralok* at this stage seemed to have accepted Dandakaranya as a viable solution for the refugee problem. So, the UCRC had to go alone. It reluctantly launched a province-wide movement in Calcutta on 7 January and hurriedly withdrew it on 18 February 1959.

According to police reports, on this day (18 February 1959) the UCRC held a large public meeting at Subodh Mullick Square. About 1,500 camp refugees, including 700 women, attended the meeting, where demands were raised for rehabilitation of the refugees within West Bengal as per the plan submitted earlier. The government was criticised for stopping the doles of those who participated in the previous *satyagraha*. After the meeting, a procession of 1,500 people—later swelling to 2,000, including about 1,000 women—headed towards the Assembly House. They were stopped by the police near the south gate of the Raj Bhavan when the two Forward Bloc MLAs, Hemanta Kumar Basu and Chitta Basu, went to the Assembly House to

hand over a memorandum to the CM. After a while, the two MLAs returned to the gathering along with Jyoti Basu, a CPI MLA. They reported that the memorandum had been handed over to the CM, who had promised to discuss their grievances in the future and promised to look into the matter of resuming doles to the affected families. These were only vague promises. But despite that, Jyoti Basu announced to the gathering that because of the assurances given by the CM the first phase of the movement was over; a second phase might be launched in the future if the demands remained unfulfilled.<sup>75</sup> But that second phase was never launched, and Prafulla Chakrabarti has described that decision as a 'requiem for the UCRC'.<sup>76</sup>

Evidence from Police Intelligence reports however suggests that even though the UCRC high command had backed down from launching another state-wide movement, its local leaders remained active in the camps in and around Calcutta. And such local activities increased in the early months of 1959.<sup>77</sup> However, the trajectories of these activities also revealed that the refugee camp was not only a space for dissent and resistance, it was also a space for order and discipline, as here the refugees were subjected to multiple sets of uneven power relationships. It was for this reason, local activism was less likely to succeed without outside political help, even though the situation in the camps was getting worse by the day.

In March 1959, the Rehabilitation Directorate released the list of families who were given dispersal orders, and the names included those of some camp leaders. There were also rumours of bribery, i.e. camp leaders being bought off with lucrative plots of land in Ranaghat or Uttarpara, so that the other refugees could be forced to move to Dandakaranya without any fear of resistance.<sup>78</sup> But the strategy did not work, as not only did the leaders refuse to relocate, but pressure was put on other families to stay put, even though some were willing to go to Dandakaranya.<sup>79</sup> Throughout 1959, more and more refugee families received their marching orders and had their cash doles stopped for refusing to go. The crescendo of protest increased in the camps, the Cooper's camp particularly becoming a hotbed of agitation, often involving violent clashes.<sup>80</sup> By the beginning of February 1960, 302 families in Cooper's camp were identified for being sent to Dandakaranya by 18 February. Protest meetings to stop it were organised, and advice was sought from the central UCRC leadership on strategies to be followed to resist such dispersal orders.<sup>81</sup> Until the middle of 1960, we come across numerous intelligence reports from refugee camps on demonstrations under UCRC leadership.<sup>82</sup>

But despite such local activities, there were unmistakable signs of declining momentum, as adequate central support was not forthcoming. From mid-1957, the Leftist parties were getting more

and more involved in the food movement and the rehabilitation issue got sidelined. There were attempts to get the refugees involved in that campaign—it is evident from two reports from Nadia. There was a successful general strike or *hartal* in Nadia district called by all the Leftist parties on 31 May 1957; and again on 17, 19, and 20 September, there was a *satyagraha* in Krishnanagar. On both occasions, refugees from Cooper's camp and Aranghata participated in the campaigns and refugee leaders like Gaur Kundu (Cooper's camp), Radheshyam Das (Aranghata), and Mahananda Ray (Cooper's camp) took leading roles or courted arrest.<sup>83</sup> By 1959, the CPI leaders became more focused on the food movement, which reached its climax in a violent clash between the police and demonstrators in Calcutta on 31 August and the killing of forty-three people in Calcutta, Howrah, and the 24-Parganas in the course of the next six days.<sup>84</sup> The eruption was the result of mobilisation that was building up for some time. We have reports of meetings in August 1959 in Cooper's camp where leaders like Prankrishna Chakrabarti and Samar Mukherjee were speaking on the food crisis in the state and imploring the refugees to join the food movement. But Dalit refugee leaders like Jatin Saha continued to speak of rehabilitation, which was not just about food, but about their entire existence.<sup>85</sup> According to a Police Intelligence report, on 25 March 1960 at a UCRC meeting, Prankrishna Chakrabarti announced in no uncertain words that time had come 'when the movement of the refugees would be integrated with the food movement of the general people of West Bengal and that the exploited masses would then stand shoulder to shoulder for the redress of their grievances, viz, food and shelter.'<sup>86</sup> The refugee movement from now on began to recede to the bottom of the Leftist agenda, more so because a general election was approaching and most of these refugees were not voters. The average office going *savarna* Bengali *bhadralok* had become fed up with the daily disruption of routine urban life by the refugee *satyagraha*. The Dandakaranya scheme seemed to be a better option for settling the problem of Dalit peasant refugees once and for all.

The SBBS too was finding it difficult to deal with the militancy of the camp refugees. In October 1958, it felt compelled to renew the movement as tension in the camps was mounting because of the recent government decision. At an SBBS meeting in Bagjola camp on 26 October 1958, it was reiterated that the Dandakaranya scheme would be resisted, and the government would be urged to set up a Land Enquiry Committee to explore vast wastelands available in the state where the refugees could be settled. And to ensure that, a countrywide movement was soon to be launched. But more ominously, it was in this meeting that the local Dalit refugee leader

Hemanta Biswas proudly announced that the refugees would now launch a campaign to forcibly occupy land around the camps and that they were united and prepared to face any repressive measure that the government might take to prevent that.<sup>87</sup> In Bagjola, this radicalism had been brewing for some time and it was a development that the SBBS leaders were unable to control. It will be pertinent here to digress a little to look closely at this Bagjola story.

In 1954, an irrigation scheme known as the Bagjola–Jatragachi–Ghuni Drainage Scheme was designed by the West Bengal government, and land for the canal, which was to be 19 miles long, was acquired. To excavate the canal, in 1955, the refugees were brought in and were given shelter on land belonging to different zamindars who were paid rent by the government. This was the genesis of the Bagjola worksite camp. The local peasants objected to the resettlement of refugees in the area and the acquisition of land for that purpose, and under CPI's leadership, they launched a *satyagraha* (Chapter 4).<sup>88</sup> When the government threatened to close down the refugee camps on 31 July 1959, at an SBBS meeting at Bagjola on 24 May 1959, Hemanta Biswas demanded immediate rehabilitation of refugees in the Bagjola area. And if that did not happen, he proposed to launch a movement for the forcible occupation of land in Dhapa, Manpur, and Bagjola areas, which they had reclaimed with their own labour. He even urged the refugees to sacrifice their lives for this purpose. Hereafter, in several meetings, the proposal was repeated.<sup>89</sup> The police knew that something was going to happen and took 'precautionary measures' on 12 and 17 June and an armed police picket was stationed. But no one had any inkling of what was going to happen on 3 July, as no one knew the exact plan and date except Biswas himself. On that day in the early morning, about 135 families from eleven camps in Bagjola forcibly took over the Sulonguri mauza and constructed 319 sheds and huts. Informed by the landlords, a police party arrived at 2 AM, with reinforcements arriving at 7 AM, but they failed to stop the occupation.<sup>90</sup>

The land thus occupied belonged to local *zamindars* and *jotedars* and had not been acquired by the government. So, this forcible occupation of private property made the local landlords extremely panicky, and it immediately brought the intervention of CPI and Congress MLAs, who promised to take the matter to the CM. They also held a public meeting at Rajarhat to generate public opinion against any such forcible occupation and all the parties decided to resist the refugees in a peaceful and united manner.<sup>91</sup> However, it is interesting to note that while the Congress and the CPI leaders clearly sided with the landlords, the PSP leaders continued to stand with the refugees. At a meeting on 2 August in Dakshinpara in DumDum, Shibnath Banerjee

and Haridas Mitra (MLAs) argued that the refugees had a moral right to settle on the land in Sulanguri mauza. With the 'sweat of their brows', they had excavated the Bagjola canal as they were given the hope that they would be rehabilitated there, but the government had reneged on that promise in the interest of the landlords. Hemanta Biswas in his speech emphatically noted that the families who had forcibly occupied the land would not vacate it under any circumstances, and they would rather face death if there were any attempts to forcibly evict them.<sup>92</sup>

Attempts certainly were made to vacate the lands. In early August 1959, the police announced by the beats of a drum that the land illegally occupied should be vacated immediately and tents taken from the Bagjola camp should be returned. Otherwise, legal action would be taken against them with charges of theft and trespass. But no action was actually taken and that emboldened the refugees, while Hemanta Biswas kept their morale high by holding regular meetings in Bagjola bazar.<sup>93</sup> At one such meeting organised by SBBS on 16 May 1960, the speakers demanded the settlement in the Sulanguri area to be regularised by the government and named Hemantanagar Krishi Colony and suggested that agricultural land be allotted to the refugees in the surrounding areas for their economic rehabilitation.<sup>94</sup> Over the following months, tension in the area mounted as landlords contemplated forced eviction of the squatters. The refugees were also prepared to retain their position, with men taking lessons in using weapons. Finally, a very uneven violent clash took place on 26 June 1960 between the local jotedar's men armed with firearms, and the refugees prepared to counter their attacks with swords and spears. The skirmishes went on for the whole day, resulting in one refugee woman and two men being killed in firing and many more wounded. The police knew about the possibility of a violent clash, and as a preventive measure had arrested Biswas the previous night. But on the day, they did not intervene until late in the afternoon. By that time, the situation had clearly gone out of hand. The police fired in self-defence, killing two more local villagers. The 'Battle of Bagjola' thus ended in bloodshed,<sup>95</sup> and indicated possibilities of more such violent clashes over land. Established political parties clearly felt that the refugee agency and radicalism were increasingly becoming difficult to control.

## **The Caste Question**

But how was the caste question relevant to this struggle for rehabilitation in 1958–59? When we analyse the caste orientation of this refugee resistance, we come across three distinct levels of



leadership. At the bottom were the camp leaders; many of them were Namasudras, but some were from other castes as well. But this camp leadership had to depend on provincial political leaders of the two-state level refugee organisations, the SBBS and the UCRC. Gauranga Das of Cooper's camp explained the situation clearly to sociologist Abhijit Dasgupta: 'I was selected as the spokesman for the Namasudras. ... I shouldered the responsibilities of taking my comrades in camps to marches and rallies in Calcutta. Camp members established links with the district-level and state-level politics through me. I also had to act as the link person between the government and the camp.'<sup>96</sup> In other words, the caste identity of the Dalit refugees was certainly of immense value for mobilisation.

But on the other hand, the leaders of this district-level and state-level politics almost invariably belonged to high castes and were predominantly Brahman. They constantly tried to play a mediating role between the refugees and the government, and thus endeavoured to keep this movement within acceptable constitutional limits of non-violent civil resistance. In a way, this mainstream political leadership acted as a moderating or restraining influence on refugee action, which often tended to straddle uneasily across the malleable threshold between violence and non-violence.

The refugee movement, in other words, was not to be allowed to disturb or disrupt the political status quo, and this explains why these movements were often withdrawn or abandoned halfway before any tangible concession was gained. The mainstream political parties also looked at the refugees as potential vote banks, and therefore were keen to prevent the caste question from rupturing a more broad-based refugee front. The CPI's additional concern was to maintain amity between the migrant peasant refugees and the local peasants—their Kisan front—by restricting possibilities of forcible land occupation (see [Chapter 4](#) for more details on this Leftist dilemma).<sup>97</sup> Therefore, although a very overwhelming proportion of the participants of this refugee movement were Dalit—and more specifically Namasudras—and their caste identity was consciously used for mobilisation, the caste question was rarely discussed in the discourse of rehabilitation politics.

In this movement, there was yet a third intermediary level of leadership between the camp leaders and the mainstream political leadership, and these were the provincial Dalit leaders. Of the two more well-known provincial Namasudra leaders, P.R. Thakur, as we have mentioned already, was a Congress MLA and was a supporter of the Dandakaranya scheme. So, we keep him out of our discussion here. Jogendranath Mandal, on the other hand, was serious about reinventing his political career as a leader of the Namasudra refugees.

But he found it difficult to operate on his own and aligned himself with the SBBS. He felt frustrated when the 1958 campaign was withdrawn, and he temporarily severed his relationship with the SBBS. He then established a new organisation, the EIRC, which he described as a ‘non-political organisation’, truly representing the interests of the refugees.<sup>98</sup> In popular perception though, it was known as a more exclusive organisation of the SC refugees, and for legitimate reasons, he focused his mobilising efforts on places like Cooper’s camp, which had a large concentration of Namasudra refugees. A Police Intelligence report noted on 1 December 1959: ‘The present population of Cooper’s camp is 23,270 (5,358 families). Out of them about 85% are Namasudras.’<sup>99</sup> With these Namasudra refugees Mandal remained in regular communication through local contacts like Panchanan Biswas. He spent nights in their huts and gave inspiring speeches, which sometimes even sounded like incitement to violence. Mandal himself acknowledged that in his meeting of 29 November 1959 he had deliberately abused and threatened the Camp Administrator, because he was showing high-handedness by stopping doles of the refugees due to no legitimate reason. Even though he had military experience and did not fear death, the Administrator babu should watch his back, warned Mandal.<sup>100</sup> And such inciting speeches were naturally linked by the authorities to sporadic incidents like stone pelting at the residence of the Camp Administrator. Intimidating posters threatening the life of the Administrator also began to appear, although there was no direct evidence to link them to Mandal’s supporters. The camp guards were engaged in angry altercations with irate Namasudra crowds, throwing not-so-veiled threats of physical violence. Some refugees in Cooper’s camp were heard threatening the camp guards with such provocative words as ‘*Amra Namasudra, khun korte bhay paina*’ (*we are Namasudras, not afraid to kill*). The situation became so volatile at one stage that the camp authorities even sought a restrictive order to prevent Mandal’s entry into the camp.<sup>101</sup>

What really led to this tension in the camp was the fact that the UCRC and its local leaders Jatin Saha, Ratish Mullick, and Nagen Halder were also trying to mobilise the Namasudra refugees for a more broad-based refugee front and were quite successful during the 1958 campaign. A refugee activist of Cooper’s camp in his recollection of those days of struggle sought to privilege a generalised refugee identity over caste: ‘the Namasudra or the other lower caste people participated in this movement to fulfil their demands not as lower caste community members but as refugees.’<sup>102</sup> This was an attitude shared by residents in other camps as well. At a group meeting with the former residents of the Bagjola camp, the participants—all Namasudras—vehemently asserted that caste did not matter in their

movement—they were fighting as a united front of all refugees.<sup>103</sup> A frequently used slogan in the refugee demonstrations of this period, ‘*Amra kara? Bastuhara*’<sup>104</sup> (Who are we? Refugees) was a powerful statement that consciously privileged their refugee identity over their caste. But this broad front began to crack when Mandal tried to intrude into the support base of the UCRC, and this escalated the tension. During a meeting on 8 November 1959, Mandal warned his followers not to be misguided by the UCRC. Such direct attacks obviously rattled the local Dalit CPI leaders like Jatin Saha, and the authorities feared that they would also up the ante. A police report observed that due to Mandal’s activities, ‘the UCRC became weak to a great extent’, and this was the reason why ‘a serious trouble ... [was] brewing at the camp.’<sup>105</sup> And to further stir up this tension, Mandal and his followers continued to attack the Bastuhara Samiti (UCRC) and its general secretary Jatin Saha for not doing anything for the refugees for the last eight years and only exploiting them in the interest of the CPI.<sup>106</sup>

The UCRC leaders were particularly incensed because Mandal at this stage was consciously seeking to introduce the caste question into the discourse of rehabilitation and was allegedly dividing the refugee front. At a meeting on 19 January 1958, attended by refugees from Palla, Chanchai and Maheshdanga Refugee transit camps, Mandal bitterly criticised the caste Hindus for being responsible for the Partition of Bengal and for neglecting the interests of the SC people. He therefore urged the SC refugees to unite to demand their legitimate rights.<sup>107</sup> For utterances like this, he came to be seen as a polarising figure. As one Police Intelligence report noted:

Shri Jogen Mandal has been spreading class and caste ... [hatred] openly in camps. In Bolpur and Uttartilpara camp meetings on 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> February [1958], he openly accused caste Hindu employees and caste Hindu people for sending refugee families to Madhya Pradesh outside West Bengal. He accused Govt to make West Bengal a caste Hindu state.<sup>108</sup>

For such statements, the attacks on him from both sides of the political spectrum were sharp and merciless. The SBBS leaders at a meeting in Bagjola camp on 29 June 1958 condemned Mandal for creating a rift among the refugees.<sup>109</sup> Even his one-time close associate Hemanta Biswas came with his followers to disrupt his meeting at Bagjola camp on 25 July 1958 and accused him of causing the Partition of Bengal.<sup>110</sup> At a meeting in July 1958 at Asrafabad transit camp in Habra in the district of 24-Parganas, Anil Singh of CPI condemned Mandal for establishing a separate organisation only with the SC refugees and appealed to him to fight a united battle for all refugees along with the UCRC. Nani Kar, also of CPI, was even more

merciless. He accused Mandal of creating a division between caste Hindu and SC refugees and thus weakening the refugee movement. He could therefore be nothing but a 'dalal' (agent) of the Congress government.<sup>111</sup> Thus, in the name of unity, there were fierce attempts to purge the caste question out of the agenda of the refugee movement, although it remained as relevant as ever. In December 1959, a few bus conductors were recruited from among the inmates of Cooper's camp. '[H]ow many of them are from the Scheduled Castes?', Mandal asked the Camp Administrator, as the majority of the residents of this camp were from among these castes. He did not get an answer, but for asking that question he got the flak of the Leftist leaders and was branded as 'communal'.<sup>112</sup>

The refugees too were often in a serious dilemma over the caste question, as to many of them unity among all refugees seemed essential for the success of their struggle for rehabilitation in West Bengal. We have the description of an interesting incident at Sealdah refugee camp on 5 February 1958 when the refugees protested against Mandal raising the caste issue, which they thought was detrimental to the unity of their struggle. They refused to participate in the procession he was planning to organise and Mandal left angrily without a single person accompanying him. However, it was later revealed that five or six Namasudra refugees loyal to Mandal surreptitiously left the camp and joined the rally at Subodh Mullick Square; their other campmates did not know. In the evening, the UCRC leaders came to the Sealdah camp and severely criticised Mandal for raising the caste issue.<sup>113</sup> There are other examples too of this dilemma. A Police Intelligence report in March 1958 showed that while 'a rift' was clearly visible among the camp refugees in Bardhaman district, a delegation from Ramchandrapur, Kashipur, and Nawabnagar camps went to Calcutta to meet the leaders of both the UCRC and the Mandal group 'with a view to bring amity between the two to strengthen the refugee movement'. But the leaders refused to listen, and their followers were clearly disappointed and confused.<sup>114</sup> In other words, in their new existence in the refugee camps, the Namasudras felt constrained to downplay their caste identity in the interest of broader refugee unity, which many of them thought was necessary for fighting for rehabilitation.

Mandal could not push the caste debate very far, and political contingency played a part in the disappearance of the caste question from the agenda of the refugee movement. Given the realities of political power relations in West Bengal, Mandal ultimately could not lead an exclusively Dalit protest or a completely apolitical movement. While he shunned the left, he started moving to the right. At the EIRC meeting in Bagjola camp on 25 July 1958, Mandal told his audience

that the mainstream political leaders belonging to CPI and PSP operating through UCRC and SBBS had misled them in the past. He advised them not to trust these organisations in the future, while EIRC was truly a non-political organisation, which would work for them. But the meeting he was addressing was being chaired by Nirmal Chandra Chatterjee of the Hindu Mahasabha/Jan Sangh, who had become the president of the EIRC.<sup>115</sup> It was possibly the right-wing leaders of the EIRC who were pushing Mandal further away from any alignment with the left. In November 1958, he turned down fresh overtures from the UCRC for collaboration.<sup>116</sup> A letter intercepted by the police revealed that while Mandal was willing to join a united front with the UCRC, at a meeting in Chatterjee's residence on 3 January 1959, he agreed not to launch such a joint movement, which was about to start on 7 January (see section on Broken Promises and Radicalism

for details of this movement).<sup>117</sup> Another intercepted letter revealed that it was in consultation with and on the advice of Chatterjee that Mandal adjusted the agenda and timetable of the EIRC campaign of December 1958.<sup>118</sup> Mandal later renewed his alliance with the SBBS and PSP, but his friendship with the Hindu Mahasabha and Jan Sangh continued, as he walked shoulder-to-shoulder with their Brahman and caste Hindu leaders. While in the changed circumstances of post-Partition West Bengal, the almost entirely Brahman right-wing leadership supported Mandal's cause and even some of them went to jail with him, they also exerted a moderating influence on him and restrained the more radical potential of his movement. We may demonstrate his dilemmas and constraints by describing some EIRC-led campaigns in what appeared to be the last phase of the refugee movement against the Dandakaranya scheme.

## **The Last Phase**

The EIRC's first major campaign was launched on 12 December 1958, when a large crowd congregated at Monument Maidan in Calcutta and proceeded towards the Writer's Building, where Mandal and Deba Prasad Ghosh submitted a memorandum to the Revenue Minister, the CM being absent on that day. The memorandum incorporated the basic demands of the EIRC, which included rehabilitation of refugees within West Bengal by developing wastelands and by setting up new industries, regularisation of the *Bynanamas*, formation of a committee to look for habitable and cultivable lands, rehabilitation of Bihar and Orissa returned refugees, camps not to be closed till all the refugees were rehabilitated, the Dandakaranya scheme not to be given effect until the refugees were rehabilitated in West Bengal and the funds

sanctioned for Dandakaranya to be spent for the settlement of refugees in West Bengal.<sup>119</sup> These constituted the basic charter of demands of the EIRC for all its subsequent movements.

From late 1959 till October 1961, under the banner of the EIRC, Mandal led a series of *satyagraha* campaigns with camp refugees in Calcutta and the districts. At a meeting in Cooper's camp on 20 December and at another in Bagjola on 21 December 1959, Mandal announced his grand scheme that in conjunction with the Jan Sangh and SBBS, the EIRC would be leading a big mass rally in Calcutta on 22 December. They would demand the withdrawal of ninety days' notice to vacate camps, restoration of stopped doles, economic rehabilitation of the refugees within West Bengal, proper implementation of the *Bynana* scheme, and finally, the removal of Mr Khanna as Union Rehabilitation Minister. If the government did not concede these demands, then a state-wide *satyagraha* campaign would be launched. He reiterated that this would be their last struggle; they would either win or die. In Mandal's emotive rhetoric, they would either live in West Bengal as citizens of a free country or would disappear from history.<sup>120</sup>

The movement as planned commenced on 22 December 1959 when his followers marched towards the Calcutta Maidan with his picture in hands. About 3,000 refugees from different camps gathered at the meeting, which elected Mandal as President and Haridas Mitra of PSP as Chief Guest. Other speakers were Haripada Bharati (Jan Sangh), Sibnath Banerjee (PSP), and other leaders from these two political parties.<sup>121</sup> After the meeting, a procession with an effigy of Mr. Khanna marched towards the office of the Union Rehabilitation Minister at 8 Theatre Road. They were intercepted by the police, whereupon they burned the effigy and made provocative speeches at an impromptu meeting. Those who were prepared to die were also ready to take lives, hinted an unnamed speaker. A deputation thereafter went to the Minister's office and handed over their memorandum to an official. The marchers dispersed peacefully after that.<sup>122</sup>

Mandal was arrested on this occasion under the Preventive Detention Act and his followers were not happy. He wrote a letter from jail, asking them to remain non-violent and protest through constitutional methods of sending memoranda and deputations. On 16 January 1960, another meeting was held near the Monument. It demanded the immediate release of Mandal and Hemanta Biswas and the resignation of the Union Rehabilitation Minister. Later, a delegation of six leaders went to see the State Rehabilitation Minister, who gave them assurance that the matter of Mandal's release would be discussed at the next cabinet meeting after the return of the CM

who was then away from the state.<sup>123</sup> But nothing happened in the next few days, and Mandal's Namasudra followers in the Bagjola camp got restive. Twelve of them, including three women, started a hunger strike on 4 February; two more joined them the next day. Mandal's son Jagadish Mandal, along with the PSP leader Dhiren Bhowmik, came to see the hunger strikers and gave them moral support.<sup>124</sup> On 11 February, on the eighth day of the fast, Deputy Minister of Rehabilitation Mrs Maya Banerjee, persuaded by a PSP delegation, came to meet the hunger strikers. Along with PSP and Jan Sangh leaders, she also spoke to the three local Namasudra camp leaders, Abani Ray (Camp 10), Rajen Mullick (Camp 8), and Manohar Biswas (Camp 7). She promised to consider their demand for the release of Mandal, restoration of cash doles, and rehabilitation within West Bengal. After her assurances, the hunger strike was withdrawn.<sup>125</sup>

After his release, Mandal came to Bagjola camp on 15 February to thank the hunger strikers. He told them that since the government had promised to fulfil their demands, they should wait until 4 March. If no concrete action was taken by then, they should launch a state-wide movement for rehabilitation. If necessary, they had to squat on government-acquired land. In his speech, he further argued that in Dandakaranya the government was spending large sums of money. If only a part of it could be spent in West Bengal, it would go a long way in reclaiming the fallow lands, benefitting not just the refugees, but other landless peasants as well, and the scheme would bring enormous opportunities for the unemployed youths of the state.<sup>126</sup> At this juncture, Mandal was also believed to have submitted his own alternative rehabilitation plan to the government;<sup>127</sup> but like all other earlier proposals, it was ignored too.

Although no state-wide campaign was immediately launched, tempers in the camps remained high, and particularly Bagjola camp continued to be volatile. The sixth annual conference of the SBBS was held at Bagjola Bazar on 15–16 May 1960. It was at this meeting that Lakshmi Munshi of Sulanguri, which had been forcibly occupied a year ago, alleged that the government had politically exploited the refugees of Bagjola by giving them false hope before the excavation of the canal started that they would be rehabilitated in the area. He urged the refugees to sacrifice their lives if they were forced to leave Sulanguri.<sup>128</sup> A little over a month later, on 26 June 1960, there was a violent clash in Sulanguri area between the local jotedar's men and the refugees, which we have described earlier (see section on Broken Promises and Radicalism).

The situation continued to be volatile at Bagjola camp, as exactly a year later, on 26 June 1961, emotions again ran high when the police resorted to firing, resulting in some casualties. Incensed camp



residents refused to hand over the dead bodies to police for autopsy, but later they were persuaded by the EIRC leaders to co-operate with the police. The following day when the bodies were released, they planned to march to Nimtola burning *ghat* in Calcutta with 1,000 people, without the permission of the police. Again, the EIRC leaders pleaded for moderation and dissuaded them from marching on to Calcutta without proper authorisation.<sup>129</sup> On 30 June, in sympathy for the residents of Bagjola camp, four refugees from other camps in Bengal—Lalbehari Ray and Jyotish Sikdar from Maheshdanga camp, Dwarikanath Mistry from No. 2 Ura camp, and Madhusudan Mandal of Sabanpur camp in Bankura—started a hunger strike at Subodh Mullick Square in Calcutta.<sup>130</sup>

In the face of so much spontaneous camp radicalism, the EIRC decided to hold a meeting on 1 July at Subodh Mullick Square to protest against police firing. The meeting was chaired by Mandal, and it passed resolutions demanding punishment of the guilty police officers, compensation for the affected families, reinstatement of cash doles and stoppage of forcible transfer of families to Dandakaranya. Co-incidentally, the President of India was visiting the city on that day. So, after the meeting, a procession led by Mandal marched towards Raj Bhavan to hand over their memorandum to the President. After reaching Esplanade East, a delegation of five headed by Mandal went to Raj Bhavan to meet the President, who agreed to meet them the next day. Thereafter, the marchers dispersed, but they organised a continuous relay hunger strike at Subodh Mullick Square to protest against police firing.<sup>131</sup> On that day, many refugees from camps outside Calcutta had travelled to the city by train and without tickets, to participate in the demonstration and hunger strike.<sup>132</sup> On 2 July, an EIRC delegation of five—led by Mandal and including Panchanan Biswas, a Dalit leader from Cooper's camp—met the President and handed in their memorandum.<sup>133</sup> At this stage, refugee radicalism in the camps was clearly pushing the EIRC leadership towards another round of mass *satyagraha* against the Dandakaranya scheme.

About one and a half month later, on 14 August 1961—on the eve of Independence Day celebrations—about 3,000 camp refugees under the leadership of Mandal marched to the Writer's Buildings and later at a meeting resolved to launch a movement 'to offer active opposition' to the Dandakaranya scheme.<sup>134</sup> The CM agreed to meet a delegation of camp refugees on 18 August but later did not keep his promise.<sup>135</sup> This flagged off the beginning of another protracted *satyagraha* campaign as every day from now on small groups of refugee volunteers led by Mandal and other leaders would march from Subodh Mullick Square to the Writer's Building. And as this movement launched by the EIRC picked up momentum, other political leaders

also joined in. The march on 15 September was led by Mandal, but was participated by other prominent leaders like Haripada Bharati and Satyen Bose of Jan Sangh, Dhiren Bhowmik, and Sibnath Banerjee of the PSP. The CM or the Rehabilitation Minister refused to see them, and they left their memorandum with an official.<sup>136</sup> This refusal sent a clear signal that the government was now less prepared to listen to the refugees or their leaders.

But Mandal and his followers were determined to continue their protest. Small groups of refugees, led by Mandal and others, marched every day from Subodh Mullick Square to the Assembly House and then courted arrest.<sup>137</sup> For some time, normal life in the central business district of Calcutta was seriously disrupted, but there was no response from the government and no sign of public sympathy. Therefore, on 24 September 1961, the EIRC and SBBS leaders met again to discuss the future course of this movement. The meeting was held either at N.C. Chatterjee's residence or at Jan Sangh's office in Calcutta, indicating clearly EIRC's growing dependence on them. It decided that the movement would be continued and intensified until the restoration of cash doles. Refugee volunteers from camps would be squatting at different places, including in front of the residence of the CM, Assembly House, and Writers' Building. Those coming from outside Calcutta would be given shelter for the nights on the roof of the Hindu Mahasabha office.<sup>138</sup> This particular campaign was formally launched on 26 September 1961 in both Calcutta and in the district headquarters under the joint auspices of the EIRC and the SBBS. Mandal personally provided leadership, and on occasions, up to 2,000 camp refugees participated.<sup>139</sup> But it did not go very far. Within a week after its launch, on 2 October 1961, there was a meeting of EIRC and SBBS leaders at Mandal's residence at 22 Sultan Alam Road, where it was decided that the movement of the camp refugees would be 'postponed' for the forthcoming pujas to give the government more time to consider their demands.<sup>140</sup> But this virtually meant the withdrawal of the movement, before it achieved any tangible results.

We do not exactly know why this movement was abruptly withdrawn. Mandal's biographer Dwaipayan Sen has argued that it was called off because: 'Even Mandal seemed to have realized the futility of his efforts to seek rehabilitation within West Bengal and reluctantly capitulated to throwing in grudging support of the scheme.'<sup>141</sup> It was obvious that the movement was not getting enough traction. But in this context, we will submit that Mandal was forced to postpone and subsequently abandon his movement because his political backers were withdrawing their support, and he was losing control over his followers, who were getting restless. As evidence, we will present reports of two meetings. The first of these was a meeting

of the camp refugees held at Subodh Mullick Square on 18 August 1961 after the CM refused to meet the camp representatives despite having promised to do so. In the meeting, the camp refugees not only criticised the CM, but also vented their anger against the leaders who had acted as intermediaries to negotiate this meeting. The leaders were branded as '*dalals*' (agents) of the government and the refugees threatened to chalk out their own programme of future actions, which would include forcible occupation of Muslim houses and vacant lands and squatting on railway lines to draw attention. The leaders calmed them down with great effort, and to assuage them, proposed to start a civil disobedience campaign from September.<sup>142</sup>

But there was not enough political support for such a campaign. It becomes evident from the report on a second meeting that we are going to cite. It was an Executive Committee meeting of the SBBS held on 6 September 1961 with Suresh Banerjee in the chair. Here, a number of leaders strongly argued that since the refugee movement was not getting any public sympathy and the election was approaching, they should not be participating in this movement any longer. At this suggestion, Haridas Mitra, MLA, reminded the meeting that this would mean stabbing the refugees from behind. So, after a protracted debate, they reluctantly agreed to participate in the EIRC-sponsored agitation. But at a later joint meeting with the EIRC, they resisted Mandal's suggestion to launch a joint movement with the UCRC.<sup>143</sup> As election was approaching, the established political leaders were eager to protect their own constituencies; the refugee movement became less important in this context. Therefore, they supported the movement rather unenthusiastically and tried their utmost to maintain order and peace at a time when the refugees were getting desperate and losing confidence in the established political leaders. So, when they failed to control their followers, they possibly put pressure on the withdrawal of the movement. The same Suresh Banerjee, who chaired the SBBS Executive meeting on 6 September, presided over the 2 October meeting at Mandal's residence where the movement was called off. More than fifty years later, a group of former residents of Bagjola camp expressed to us their sense of betrayal as their leaders abandoned them before the goals of their movement were achieved.<sup>144</sup>

In the last phase, with the SBBS support dwindling, the movement of the camp refugees under EIRC became almost entirely dependent on the right-wing groups like Jan Sangh and Hindu Mahasabha, which could not provide them with adequate support. On the other side of the political spectrum, the UCRC and CPI had clearly become disinterested in the cause of the camp refugees at this stage. During the time of the hunger strikes in various camps in July 1961

(mentioned earlier in this section), Jyoti Basu and Samar Mukherjee wrote to the CM requesting him to stop dispersing the refugees to Dandakaranya against their will and to resettle as many of them as possible in West Bengal.<sup>145</sup> But beyond letter writing, we do not see any other leftist initiative to resist the policy of dispersal at this stage. So, the Congress government could now afford to ignore the refugee protests, particularly as the Bengali middle-class *bhadralok*, irrespective of their political sympathies, seemed to have arrived at an unstated consensus that the problem of these peasant refugees could best be solved by settling them outside West Bengal. Everyone now began to condemn the so-called indolent refugees for not going to Dandakaranya.

Contemporary Bengali literature purchased and popularised that narrative, as Amiyabhushan Majumdar's novel *Nirbaash (The Exile)*, published in 1959, dwelt at length on the theme of the reluctance of the camp refugees to go to Dandakaranya. It seemed to have uncritically accepted the rationale of the development plan and the consequent dispersal scheme for refugee rehabilitation as provided by the state.<sup>146</sup> In May 1960, a communist MLA, Bankim Mukherjee had no qualm about commenting in the Assembly that years of inaction and survival on doles had made the camp refugees develop a beggar-like habit of dependence, which for their own benefit needed to be reformed.<sup>147</sup> This idea—that reluctance to work was the main reason behind their resistance to the Dandakaranya scheme—had become a widely shared common sense in *bhadralok* Bengal. Even an educated middle-class Dalit, who described himself as 'a truly unknown untouchable Indian', seemed to have internalised this government stereotype. 'The people who set up the colonies were the best section of the Bengali Hindu middle class in East Bengal', he writes in his autobiography. Those in the camps, on the other hand, represented 'a generation of refugees ... spoilt by doles offered to them. They resisted going outside the state. [ ... ] But to demand from the harassed West Bengal government that all the people should be resettled in West Bengal was most injudicious on the part of the articulate section of the refugees.'<sup>148</sup> This seems to have become the middle-class consensus in West Bengal by 1959–60. For all the opposition political parties, rehabilitation now seemed to have become an issue for political point scoring against the government on the floor of the Legislative Assembly, while all of them seemed to have tacitly accepted Dandakaranya as the only viable solution to West Bengal's refugee problem.

For evidence of that political consensus, we may look at the Legislative Assembly debates in 1959–60. On 4 December 1959, Samar Mukherjee brought a non-official resolution in the Legislative

Assembly critiquing the government rehabilitation policy. The critique was focused more on the failure to properly implement the policy, not on the policy itself. By way of supporting the resolution, Jyoti Basu emphatically said that ‘when for the first time in this Assembly the Dandakaranya plan was mentioned, we were not opposed to it.’ At that point, it was expected that there would be more consultation, which never happened. ‘If there was will, the Dandakaranya project could have been turned into a good project’, Basu emphasised, but it had been botched up by the inefficiency of the Congress government. He also reiterated that they wanted only those refugees to be sent to Dandakaranya who would be willing to go there voluntarily. Instead, the government forced them to move, stopped their doles to coerce them and turned them into ‘slaves’. They were not treated as ‘Indian citizens with rights’.<sup>149</sup> On the other side of the political spectrum, Ananda Gopal Mukherjee demanded more educational and healthcare facilities to be developed in Dandakaranya, while Suresh Banerjee recommended the reconstitution of the Dandakaranya administration to generate confidence among the refugees before they were sent there.<sup>150</sup> Forward Bloc leader Apurba Lal Mazumdar, who was leading the Bettiah *satyagraha* a few months ago, objected to ‘coercive methods’ being used to force the refugees to go to the ‘inhospitable land’ of Dandakaranya. So, he pleaded for the Dandakaranya Development Authority to properly reclaim the land and provide adequate infrastructural facilities before the refugees were sent there.<sup>151</sup> In short, all these political leaders wanted to fix the Dandakaranya project; no one questioned the dispersal policy anymore. No one advocated the rehabilitation of these refugees in West Bengal. Some of the Leftist leaders continued to play with refugee emotions and kept their dream alive, without any honest initiative to resettle them in their own state. This, as we shall see in the Epilogue, led to a disastrous result like the Marichjhanpi massacre of 1978–79.

After 1961, the government forcibly dispatched many of the camp refugees to Dandakaranya, where, by 1965, 7,500 refugee families were settled.<sup>152</sup> After June 1962, the state did not take any more responsibility for the camps (except PL camps), and those who still refused to go to Dandakaranya were simply erased out of the record books.<sup>153</sup> The fact that the Indian state reneged on its promise and failed to provide these refugees with proper rehabilitation within an appropriate cultural space did no longer make the political establishment uncomfortable. Within a short period of time, these refugees, now scattered across several linguistic provinces in central and western India, disappeared from the public memory of the Bengali *bhadralok*. The Dalit refugees of East Bengal learnt in a hard way that

they could not claim any space as their own in the new Hindu homeland, which they had once fought for.

<sup>1</sup> Debjani Sengupta, *The Partition of Bengal: Fragile Borders and New Identities*, Delhi, Cambridge University Press, 2016, 164.

<sup>2</sup> Anadi Mondol, interview with Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury on 15 March 2002.

<sup>3</sup> For more details on the activities of this organisation, see Anindita Ghoshal, *Refugees, Borders and Identities: Rights and Habitat in East and Northeast India*, London and New York, Routledge, 2021, 168–74.

<sup>4</sup> See numerous reports on such meetings in IB, F. No. 96-49, Part II, WBSA.

<sup>5</sup> Weekly Report, week ending 16 January 1949, IB, F. No. 1838/40, Part III; Annual Administration Report 1953, IB, S. No. 220/1928, F. No. 32/28, WBSA.

<sup>6</sup> Extract from WBPA, 9 September 1950, IB, S. No. 46/1922, F. No. 321/22, Extract folder, WBSA.

<sup>7</sup> Babul Kumar Pal, *Barisal theke Dandakaranya: Purbabanger Krishijibi udbastur punarbashaner Itihas (From Barisal to Dandakaranya: Rehabilitation of the Agriculturist Refugees of East Bengal)*, Kolkata, Mitram, 2010, 77–78.

<sup>8</sup> Report of the Convention held at Bandhabnagar, DumDum, by UCRC, on 7 December 1952; copy of a Report of a D.I.O. dt. 16 March 1953; copy of a Report of a D.I.O. dt. 30 March 1953, IB, S. No. 70/24, F. No. 1652/24, Part V, WBSA.

<sup>9</sup> 'Extract From a Short Note Prepared by an I.B. Officer in August '50 on the Activities of Different Political Parties in Refugee Camps', IB, F. No. 96-49, Part II, WBSA.

<sup>10</sup> Abstract dt. 3 July 1954, IB, S. No. 70/24, F. No. 1652/24, Part V, WBSA.

<sup>11</sup> IB Officer's report, dt. 20 August 1954, IB, S. No. 70/24, F. No. 1652/24, Part V, WBSA.

<sup>12</sup> See Several Reports of such meetings and the Notice of the United Central Refugee Council, dt. 30 October 1954, in IB, S. No. 70/24, F. No. 1652/24, Part V, WBSA.

<sup>13</sup> WBPA, dt. 7 July, 14 July, 4 August 1956, IB, F. No. 1483/32, WBSA.

<sup>14</sup> Abstract dt. 23 February 1957, IB, S. No. 313/39, F. No. 303(1)/39, WBSA.

<sup>15</sup> Extract from a Confidential Report of I.B. Calcutta dt. 24 December 1950, IB, F. No. 96-49, Part II, WBSA.

<sup>16</sup> Extract from the Copy of Report dt. 7 July 1950 of Security Inspector Sri K.M. Banerji, IB, F. No. 96-49, Part II, WBSA.

<sup>17</sup> History Sheet of Sovamoy Sur, IB, S. No. 41/24, F. No. 95/24, WBSA.

<sup>18</sup> A Report Regarding a Meeting at Maidan dt. 25 December 1956, IB, S. No. 202/46, F. No. 191/46, WBSA.

<sup>19</sup> 'A Short Note on Jyotish Chandra Ray', IB, F. No. 238/42, Part II, WBSA.

<sup>20</sup> See various reports in IB, S. No. 127/1927, F. No. 329/27, WBSA.

<sup>21</sup> 'Copy of a Secret Report, Patna, dt. 20 December 1956', IB, F. No. 238/42, Part II, WBSA.

<sup>22</sup> 'Addendum to the Dossier of N.C. Chatterjee (Ex-MP), written from 1 January 1962 to 31 December 1963', IB, F. No. 238/42(1), Part III, WBSA.

<sup>23</sup> Extract from Summary Report of a Meeting at Bongaon Town Hall Maidan Held on 15 January 1956, IB, F. No. 321/22, S. No. 46/1922, WBSA.



<sup>24</sup> Abstract dt. 26 June 1954, IB, S. No. 70/24, F. No. 1652/24, Part V, WBSA.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Paula Banerjee and Sucharita Sengupta, 'The Refugee Movement: A Founding Moment of Popular Movement', in Ranabir Samaddar, ed., *From Popular Movements to Rebellion: The Naxalite Decade*, New Delhi, Social Science Press, 2018, 31–32, 35–36.

<sup>26</sup> See Reports of such meetings in *Swadhinata*, 1 June, 19 June, 6 July 1956.

<sup>27</sup> *Swadhinata*, 14 April 1956.

<sup>28</sup> Extract from Memo dt. 26 May 1953, from IB, C.I.D., W.B., to Addl. S.P., D.I.B., 24-Parganas, IB, S. No. 41/24, F. No. 95/24, WBSA.

<sup>29</sup> *Swadhinata*, 21 May 1956.

<sup>30</sup> Extract from a D.I.O.'s report dt. 6 March 1960, IB, S. No. 78(131–136)/1927, F. No. 329/27, WBSA.

<sup>31</sup> Molla Ershad Ali and Mohammad Ali Molla, to Chief Minister of West Bengal, 7th Day of Sravan 1360 BS [1953], IB, S. No. 312/39, F. No. 397/39, WBSA.

<sup>32</sup> Copy of telephone message dt. 26 June 1956 from Addl. S.P., D.I.B., Alipore to S.S., IB, Calcutta, IB, S. No. 41/24, F. No. 95/24, WBSA.

<sup>33</sup> Copy of telegram dt. 19 July 1954 from Addl. S.P., D.I.B., Alipore to S.S., IB, W.B., Calcutta, IB, S. No. 70/24, F. No. 1652/24, Part V, WBSA. Also see Committee of Review of Rehabilitation Work in West Bengal, 'Report on Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons from East Pakistan Living at Bagjola Group of Ex-camp Sites in West Bengal', 1970, 8.

<sup>34</sup> See various reports on refugee meetings in 1955 in IB, S. No. 46/22, F. No. 321/22, Part V, WBSA.

<sup>35</sup> Meeting Report of a D.I.O. dt. 17 January 1956; copy of report dt. 30 January 1956 from a D.I.B. Officer, IB, S. No. 46/1922, F. No. 321/22, WBSA.

<sup>36</sup> See Reports on Refugee Meetings in Nadia district in IB, S. No. 313/39, F. No. 303(1)/39, WBSA.

<sup>37</sup> Anwesha Sengupta, "'They Must Have to Go Therefore, Elsewhere": Mapping the Many Displacements of Bengali Hindu Refugees from East Pakistan, 1947 to 1960s', Public Arguments-2, Tata Institute of Social Sciences Patna Centre, January 2017, 13.

<sup>38</sup> WBLAP, vol. 23, 28 September 1959, 282.

<sup>39</sup> Manosanta Biswas, *Banglar Matua Andolon: Samaj, Sanskriti, Rajneeti* (The Matua Movement of Bengal: Society, Culture, Politics), Kolkata, Setu Prakasani, 2016, 276–77.

<sup>40</sup> WBLAP, 5 July 1957, 208–09; 2 January 1959, 598–600.

<sup>41</sup> Group meeting with Bagjola camp residents on 26 June 2013.

<sup>42</sup> Copy of an I.B. Officer's Observation Report of 4th Annual Conference of the UCRC, dt. 8 December 1957, IB, F. No. 1483/32, WBSA.

<sup>43</sup> Extract From the Report in Connection with the Disturbances Created by the Refugees in Vishnupur Court on 18 March 1958, IB, F. No. 1483/32 (P.F.), WBSA.

<sup>44</sup> For details of this movement, see Swati Sengupta Chatterjee, 'Insights on Camp Refugees of Bettiah and Bishnupur: An Anti-dispersal Satyagraha of 1956–57', *NSOU OPEN JOURNAL*, 3:1, January 2020.

<sup>45</sup> 'H.S. Folder of Mahadeb Bhattacharji', IB, F. No. 96-49, Part II, WBBS.

<sup>46</sup> Extract from SBDN dt. 22 January 1958, IB, S. No. 76/1924, F. No. 353/24, WBSA.

<sup>47</sup> Extract from IB Officer's Report dt. 5 February 1958 Regarding Refugee



Rally at Raja Subodh Mullick Square; extract from SBDN dt. 6 February 1958, IB, S. No. 76/1924, F. No. 353/24, WBSA.

<sup>48</sup> 'H.S. Folder of Mahadeb Bhattacharji', IB, F. No. 96-49, Part II, WBBS.

<sup>49</sup> Copy No. 713(3)/120-48(M), dt. 25 February 1958 from Supdt. of Police, D.I.B., Burdwan to S.B., I.B., C.I.D., West Bengal, IB, F. No. 96-49, Part II, WBSA.

<sup>50</sup> Copy of No. 896(7)/120-48, dt. 14 March 1958 from Supdt. of Police, D.I.B., Burdwan to S.S., IB., C.I.D., West Bengal, IB, F. No. 96-49, Part II, WBSA.

<sup>51</sup> Meeting Report, IB, F. No. 1808-58 (24-Parganas), page 49, WBSA.

<sup>52</sup> Extract from Special Branch Daily Notes, dt. 18 March 1958, IB, F. No. 96-49, Pt. II; Report of a secret source dt. 17 March 1958, forwarded from DC, SB, Calcutta to IB, Bengal, IB, S. No. 76/1924, F. No. 353/24, WBSA.

<sup>53</sup> Extract from an I.B. Officer's Report Regarding Satyagraha Movement by the Refugees on 18 March 1958; extract from SBDN dt. 22 March 1958, IB, S. No. 76/1924, F. No. 353/24; also see various reports in IB, F. No. 96-49, Part II, WBSA.

<sup>54</sup> Copy of an I.B. Officer's Report dt. 26 March 1958; extract from an I.B. Officer's Report dt. 27 March 1958, IB, S. No. 76/1924, F. No. 353/24, WBSA.

<sup>55</sup> Extract from I.B. Officer's Report dt. 27 March 1958; extract from SBDN dt. 28 March 1958, IB, S. No. 76/1924, F. No. 353/24, WBSA.

<sup>56</sup> Extract from a Copy of report of D.I.O. (7), dt. 25 March 1958; extract from an I.B. Officer's Report dt. 29 March 1958; Report of today's (28 March 1958) Refugee Satyagraha launched at Esplanade, IB, S. No. 76/1924, F. No. 353/24, WBSA.

<sup>57</sup> Under Memo No. DC/CON/17(4), dt. 31 March 1958, from DCSB, Calcutta to the DIG, IB, CID, WB, and another 3. 'A short note on the refugee agitation in Calcutta', IB, S. No. 76/1924, F. No. 353/24; 'Note on the activities of the Sara Bangla Bastuhara Sammelan', IB, F. No. 96-49, Part II, WBSA.

<sup>58</sup> Extract from SBDN dt. 3 April 1958, IB, F. No. 96-49, Part II, WBSA.

<sup>59</sup> Report dt. 3 April 1958 of the Satyagraha Movement Started by the Refugees; extract from SBDN dt. 7 April 1958, IB, F. No. 96-49, Part II, WBSA.

<sup>60</sup> Report of the Fourth Annual Conference of the U.C.R.C. held at Cooper's Camp, Ranaghat on 7, 8, and 9 December 1957, forwarded under Memo dt. 11 December 1957 S.P., D.I.B, Malda, IB, S. No. 313/39, F. No. 303/39, Part II, WBSA.

<sup>61</sup> Prafulla K. Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal*, Calcutta, Naya Udyog, 1999, 182-84.

<sup>62</sup> Under Memo No. DC/CON/17(4), dt. 31 March 1958, from DCSB, Calcutta to the DIG, IB, CID, WB, and another 3. 'A short note on the refugee agitation in Calcutta', IB, S. No. 76/1924, F. No. 353/24. Also F. No. 1304/58, P. No. 281-79. Agitation by the Refugees, IB, S. No. 313/39, F. No. 303/39, WBSA.

<sup>63</sup> Quoted in Sengupta, "They must have to go", 13.

<sup>64</sup> Interview of Security Prisoner With Sri Deven Sen and Others at DumDum Jail on 12 April 1958, IB, F. No. 96-49, Part II, WBSA.

<sup>65</sup> Extract from SBDN dt. 16 April 1958, IB, S. No. 76/1924, F. No. 353/24, WBBS.

<sup>66</sup> 'Interview Between the PSP leaders viz., Shibnath Banerji, Sunil Das [et al.] and the Leaders Detained under P.D. Act in the DumDum Central Jail', IB, F. No. 96-49, Part II, WBSA.

<sup>67</sup> Extract from SBDN dt. 17 April 1958; copy of an I.B. Officer's Report dt. 18 April 1958, IB, S. No. 76/1924, F. No. 353/24, WBSA.

<sup>68</sup> Extract from SBDN dt. 18 April 1958, IB, S. No. 76/1924, F. No. 353/24,

WBSA.

<sup>69</sup> Extract from SBDN dt. 22 April 1958, IB, S. No. 76/1924, F. No. 353/24, WBSA.

<sup>70</sup> For more details on this movement, see [Chakrabarti, \*The Marginal Men\*](#), 177–81; T.Y. Tan and G. Kudaisya, *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia*, London and New York, Routledge, 2000, 152–53.

<sup>71</sup> F. No. 1304/58, P. No. 281-79. Agitation by the Refugees, IB, S. No. 313/39, F. No. 303/39, WBSA.

<sup>72</sup> Copy of Memo No. 2627(2) dt. 23 August 1958, from S.P., D.I.B., Nadia, to S.S., I.B., W.B., IB, S. No. 313/39, F. No. 303/39, WBSA.

<sup>73</sup> Abstract dt. 19 July 1958; abstract dt. 30 August 1958; copy of No. 4/R. 2462/19-58 P.185, from S.P., D.I.B., Nadia, to D.I.G., I.B., C.I.D., West Bengal, IB, S. No. 313/39, F. No. 303/39, WBSA.

<sup>74</sup> ‘Agitation of the Refugees’, dt. 15 November 1958; ‘Agitation of the Refugees’, in Continuation of the Report dt. 14 November 1958, IB, F. No. 96-49, Part III, WBSA.

<sup>75</sup> Extract from CP’s report dt. 21 February 1959, IB, S. No. 78(131/36)/1927, F. No. 329/27, WBSA.

<sup>76</sup> [Chakrabarti, \*The Marginal Men\*](#), 182–207.

<sup>77</sup> Copy of a D.I.O.’s Report dt. 13 March 1959, IB, S. No. 313/39, F. No. 303/39, WBSA.

<sup>78</sup> Copy of a D.I.O.’s Report dt. 13 March 1959, IB, S. No. 313/39, F. No. 303/39, WBSA.

<sup>79</sup> The leaders at Cooper’s camp—Jatin Saha, Ratish Mullick, and Narayan Kundu—all were ordered to move to their new rehabilitation centre in Sonarpur, but all of them refused to go and as a result had their cash doles stopped. Report on Cooper’s Camp affairs (submitted by a D.I.O. on 1 December 1959), IB, S. No. 313/39, F. No. 303/39; copy of a D.I.O.’s Report dt. 19 March 1959, IB, S. No. 313/39, F. No. 303/39, WBSA.

<sup>80</sup> Report on Cooper’s Camp affairs (submitted by a DIO on 1 December 1959), IB, S. No. 313/39, F. No. 303/39, WBSA.

<sup>81</sup> Copy of a Postcard dt. 8 February 1960 in Bengali addressed to Com. Amritendu Mukherjee, C.P.I. Office, ... written by Gour Kundu from Ranaghat, IB, S. No. 313/39, F. No. 303/39, Part I, WBSA.

<sup>82</sup> Police Abstracts dt. 10 June, 11 June, 18 June 1960, IB, S. No. 313/39, F. No. 303/39, WBSA.

<sup>83</sup> Memos dt. 31 May 1957, 19 September 1957, 22 September 1957 from the Supdt. of Police, D.I.B., Nadia, to S.S., I.B., C.I.D., W.B., IB, S. No. 313/39, F. No. 303/39, Part II, WBSA

<sup>84</sup> ‘Text of Resolution Adopted by the Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party of India on September 23, 1959’, in Suranjan Das and Premansu Kumar Bandyopadhyay, eds., *Food Movement of 1959: Documenting a Turning Point in the History of West Bengal*, Kolkata, K.P. Bagchi & Co., 2004, 95.

<sup>85</sup> Copy of a D.I.O.’s report dt. 15 August 1959, IB, S. No. 313/39, F. No. 303/39, WBSA.

<sup>86</sup> Extract from SBDN dt. 26 March 1960, IB, S. No. 313/39, F. No. 303/39, WBSA.

<sup>87</sup> Copy of a Report of a D.I.O. dt. 28 October 1958; copy of an I.B. Officer’s Report dt. 29 October 1958, IB, S. No. 76/1924, F. No. 353/24, WBSA.

<sup>88</sup> Copy of an I.B. Officer’s Report dt. 5 July 1959, IB, S. No. 288/46, F. No. 820/46, WBSA.

<sup>89</sup> Copy of Report of a D.I.O. dt. 24 May 1959; copy of an I.B. Officer's Report dt. 30 May 1959, IB, F. No. 96-49, Part II; extract from SBDN dt. 1 June 1959, IB, S. No. 288/46, F. No. 820/46, WBSA.

<sup>90</sup> Copy of an I.B. Officer's Report dt. 5 July 1959, IB, S. No. 288/46, F. No. 820/46, WBSA.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Copy of a Report dt. 3 August 1959 of a D.I.O., IB, S. No. 288/46, F. No. 820/46, WBSA.

<sup>93</sup> I.B. Officer's Report dt. 11 August 1959, IB, S. No. 288/46, F. No. 820/46, WBSA.

<sup>94</sup> Copy of Memo No. 5011/132-59, dt. 19 May 1960 from Addl. S.P., D.I.B., 24-Parganas to S.S.P., I.B., C.I.D, West Bengal, IB, F. No. 96-49, Part II, WBSA.

<sup>95</sup> Naliniranjan Mandal, 'Udbastu neta Hemanta Biswas o Bagjolar larai' (Refugee leader Hemanta Biswas and the Battle of Bagjola), *Nikhil Bharat*, January 2010, 32; *Jugantar*, 2 July 1960.

<sup>96</sup> Abhijit Dasgupta, *Displacement and Exile: The State-Refugee Relations in India*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2016, 64-65.

<sup>97</sup> This was quite evident during the Bagjola camp squatting incident in July 1959. See 'Copy of an I.B. Officer's Report dt. 5 July 1959', IB, S. No. 288/46, F. No. 820/46, WBSA.

<sup>98</sup> Report of a D.I.B. Officer dt. 25 February 1958; copy of Report of a D.I.O. dt. 26 July 58; IB, F. No. 1483/32(P.F.), WBSA.

<sup>99</sup> Report on Cooper's Camp affairs (submitted by a D.I.O. on 1 December 1959), IB, F. No. 303/39, WBSA.

<sup>100</sup> Copy of a D.I.O.'s Report dt. 20 December 1959, IB, S. No. 288/46, F. No. 820/46, WBSA.

<sup>101</sup> Report on Cooper's Camp affairs (submitted by a D.I.O. on 1 December 1959); copy of a D.I.O.'s Report dt. 1 December 1959 on Cooper's Camp affairs, IB, F. No. 303/39, WBSA.

<sup>102</sup> Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, 'Politics of Rehabilitation in Struggle of the Lower Caste Refugees in West Bengal', *Voice of Dalit*, 3:1, January-June 2010, 72.

<sup>103</sup> Group Meeting with Bagjola Camp Residents on 22 June 2013.

<sup>104</sup> 'Extract from an I.B. Officer's Report', dt. 24 March 1958, IB, F. No. 96-49, Part II, WBSA.

<sup>105</sup> Report on Cooper's Camp Affairs (submitted by a D.I.O. on 1 December 1959), IB, F. No. 303/39, WBSA.

<sup>106</sup> Copy of a D.I.O.'s Report dt. 20 December 1959, IB, S. No. 288/46, F. No. 820/46, WBSA.

<sup>107</sup> Copy of a Report of D.I.O.(5) dt. 28 January 1958, IB, F. No. 96-49, Part II, WBSA.

<sup>108</sup> Copy of I.B. Officer's Report dt. 15 March 1958, IB, F. No. 1483/32, WBSA.

<sup>109</sup> Copy of a Report of a D.I.O. dt. 1 July 1958, IB, F. No. 820/46, WBSA.

<sup>110</sup> Copy of Memo No. 7302/57-58, dt. 30 July 1958 from Addl. S.P., D.I.B., 24-Parganas to the Spl. Supdt. of Police, III, I.B., C.I.D., West Bengal, IB, S. No. 50/30, F. No. 64/30, WBSA.

<sup>111</sup> Copy of Memo No. 7008/57-58 from Addl. Supdt. of Police, 24-Parganas to S.S., I.B., C.I.D., West Bengal, Calcutta, IB, F. No. 88-39(1) P.F., WBSA.

<sup>112</sup> Copy forward under No. 5/19-59(1), dt. 2 January 1950 from Supdt. of Police, D.I.B., Nadia to S.S., I.B., C.I.D., West Bengal, Calcutta, IB, F. No.

998/44, WBSA.

<sup>113</sup> Copy of Secret Report No. nil dt. 6 February 1958 from R.I.O. Sealdah; copy of I.B. Officer's Report dt. 6 February 1958, IB, S. No. 288/46, F. No. 820/46, WBSA.

<sup>114</sup> Copy of No.896(7)/120-48 dt. 14 March 1958 from Supdt. of Police, D.I.B., Burdwan to S.S., I.B., C.I.D., West Bengal, Calcutta, IB, F. No. 96-49, Part II, WBSA.

<sup>115</sup> Copy of Memo No. 7302/57-58, dt. 30 July 1958 from Addl. S.P., D.I.B., 24-Pargs. to the Spl. Supdt. of Police, III, I.B., C.I.D., West Bengal, IB, S. No. 50/30, F. No. 64/30, WBSA.

<sup>116</sup> 'Agitation by the Refugees', dt. 15 November 1958, IB, F. No. 96/49, Part III, WBSA.

<sup>117</sup> 'Agitation by the Refugees', the Continuation of the Report dt. 14 November 1958, IB, F. No. 96-49; C.I.D., S.B. Interception Report dt. 8 December 1958; Letter from Jogendra Nath Mandal to N.C. Chatterjee, dt. 3 December 1958; Addendum to the dossier of N.C. Chatterjee (Ex-MP) of Calcutta and of New Delhi, Serial No. 6, IB, F. No. 238/42(1), Part III, WBSA.

<sup>118</sup> Intercepted letter from J.N. Mandal to N.C. Chatterjee, dt. 3 December 1958, IB, F. No. 238/42(1), Part II; 'Addendum to the dossier of N.C. Chatterjee, Ex-MP', IB, F. No. 238/42(1), Part III, WBSA.

<sup>119</sup> 'Agitation of Refugees'. In Continuation of the Report dt. 14 November 1958, IB, F. No. 96-49, Part III, WBSA.

<sup>120</sup> Copy of a D.I.O.'s Report dt. 20 December 1959; copy of a telephone message dt. 21 December 1959 from a D.I.O. Camp-Kamardanga to Addl. S.P., D.I.B., 24-Parganas, IB, S. No. 288/46, F. No. 820/46, WBSA.

<sup>121</sup> An I.B. Officer's Report dt. 23 December 1959, IB, F. No. 353/24(P.F.), Part VI; an I.B. Officer's Report dt. 23 December 1959, IB, S. No. 288/46, F. No. 820/46, WBSA.

<sup>122</sup> Extract from SBDN dt. 25 December 1959, IB, S. No. 288/46, F. No. 820/46, WBSA.

<sup>123</sup> Copy of I.B. Officer's Report dt. 18 January 1960, IB, F. No. 303/39; also F. No. 96-49, Part II, WBSA.

<sup>124</sup> Copy of an I.B. Officer's Report dt. 6 February 1960; copy of Report dt. 8 February 1960 from a D.I.O., IB, S. No. 288/46, F. No. 820/46, WBSA.

<sup>125</sup> Extract from copy of Report dt. 12 February 1960 from a D.I.O., IB, S. No. 288/46, F. No. 820/46, WBSA.

<sup>126</sup> Copy of a Report of a D.I.B. Officer dt. 16 February 1960, IB, F. No. 96-49, Part II; copy of a Report of a D.I.B. Officer dt. 16 February 1960, IB, F. No. 353/24(P.F.), Part VI, WBSA.

<sup>127</sup> Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, 'Politics of Rehabilitation: Struggle of the Lower Caste Refugees in West Bengal', *Voice of Dalit*, 3:1, 2010, 75.

<sup>128</sup> Copy of Memo No. 5011/132-59, dt. 19 May 1960 from Addl. S.P., D.I.B., 24-Parganas to S.S.P., I.B., C.I.D., West Bengal, IB, F. No. 96-49, Part II, WBSA.

<sup>129</sup> Copy forwarded under Memo No. 10041(6) dt. 27 June 1961 from Dy. Commissioner of Police, Special Branch, Calcutta, to D.I.G., I.B., West Bengal, IB, S. No. 288/46, F. No. 820/46, WBBS.

<sup>130</sup> Copy of telephone message dt. 30 June 1961 from A.S.I. Dharendra Ghosh of I.B., to DS(H), Calcutta, IB, S. No. 288/46, F. No. 820/46, WBBS.

<sup>131</sup> Copy of telephone message dt. 1 July 1961 from A.S.I., Haripada Nayak of IB to DS(H) IB, Calcutta; copy of an I.B. Officer's Report dt. 2 July 1961, IB, S. No. 288/46, F. No. 820/46; copy of an I.B. Officer's Report dt. 2 July 1961, IB,

F. No. 353/24 (P.F.), Part VI, WBSA.

<sup>132</sup> Copy of telephone message dt. 1 July 1961 from D.I.O. Ranaghat, to DC, SB, Calcutta, Report to I.B., Calcutta and SRP, Sealdah and DIB, Nadia, IB, S. No. 288/46, F. No. 820/46, WBSA.

<sup>133</sup> Copy of telephone message dt. 2 July 1961 from A.S.I., Haripada Nayak of I.B. to DS(H) I.B., Calcutta, IB, S. No. 288/46, F. No. 820/46, WBSA.

<sup>134</sup> 'Agitation by the Refugees', F. No. 3380-60 (M.F.), Page Nos. 28–31, IB, F. No. 353/24, WBSA.

<sup>135</sup> 'Agitation of the Refugees', Report dt. 19 August 1961, IB, S. No. 59/24, F. No. 353/24, WBSA.

<sup>136</sup> Some of these demands were—the refugees were not to be sent out of West Bengal against their will, Dandakaranya was to be brought under the control of the central government, resettlement of the refugees who were still at Sealdah station area, education of the refugee students, reintroduction of cash doles, economic rehabilitation of all classes of refugees, compensation for victims of the Bagjola police firing, and punishment of the guilty officers. See copy of I.B. Officer's Report, dt. 16 September 1961, IB, F. No. 33/24(P.F.), Part VI, WBSA.

<sup>137</sup> Copy of I.B. Officer's report, dt. 18 September 1961; copy of I.B. Officer's report, dt. 19 September 1961; copy forwarded under Memo No. 1440(8), dt. 20 September 1961, IB, F. No. 33/24(P.F.), Part VI, WBSA.

<sup>138</sup> A short note on Sri N.C. Chatterjee for 1961, IB, F. No. 238/42(1), Part II; copy forwarded under Memo dt. 25 September 1961, IB, S. No. 288/46, F. No. 820/46, WBSA.

<sup>139</sup> Copy forwarded under Memo No. 14634(8), 25 September 1961; copy forwarded under Memo No. 14769(8), 26–27 September 1961, IB, F. No. 33/24(P.F.), Part VI, WBSA.

<sup>140</sup> Copy forwarded under Memo No. 15105(5), dt. 3 October 1961, From Dy. Commissioner of Police, Special Branch, Calcutta, to D.I.G., IB, WB, Calcutta, IB, S. No. 118/24, F. No. 353-24(P.F.), WBSA.

<sup>141</sup> Dwaipayan Sen, *The Decline of the Caste Question: Jogendranath Mandal and the Defeat of Dalit Politics in Bengal*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, 234–35.

<sup>142</sup> 'Agitation by the Refugees', Report dt. 19 August 1961, IB, S. No. 59/24, F. No. 353/24, WBSA.

<sup>143</sup> 'Agitation by the Refugees': Received under Memo No. 1340(4)/P.M. 553/61, VIII, dt. 8 September 1961, From DCSB, Calcutta, IB, S. No. 59/24, F. No. 353/24, WBSA.

<sup>144</sup> Group meeting with Bagjola camp residents, Bagjola, 22 June 2013.

<sup>145</sup> Jhuma Sen, 'Reconstructing Marichjhapi: From Margins and Memories of Migrant Lives', in Urvasi Butalia, ed., *Partition: The Long Shadow*, New Delhi, Zubaan, 2015, 107–12.

<sup>146</sup> Sengupta, *The Partition of Bengal*, 166.

<sup>147</sup> Quoted in Biswas, *Banglar Matua Andolon*, 280.

<sup>148</sup> D.P. Das, *The Untouchable Story*, New Delhi, Allied Publishers, 1985, ix, 124, 127.

<sup>149</sup> WBLAP, 4 December 1959, 578–79, 596–97.

<sup>150</sup> WBLAP, 1 April 1960, 5–6.

<sup>151</sup> WBLAP, 1 April 1960, 7.

<sup>152</sup> Tan and Kudaisya, *The Aftermath of Partition*, 151.

<sup>153</sup> Udit Sen, *Citizen Refugee: Forging the Indian Nation After Partition*,



## Conclusion

The Dalits in Bengal were neither unmindful spectators nor accidental victims of Partition politics and associated violence in the fateful years of 1946–47. They had little power to influence the ultimate decision to divide Bengal. But that did not mean they were not involved in the series of events that took place in the lead-up to the Partition, or they remained unaffected by them. They had indeed no option to remain passive onlookers, as the decision had serious implications for the future of their ancestral habitational spaces. They had to take sides, and as a result, their political movement was fractured and lost its autonomy. One group under Jogendranath Mandal and the All India Scheduled Castes Federation (AISCF) opposed Partition, aligned with the Muslim League, and stood behind the demand for United Bengal. On the other hand, Radhanath Das, P.R. Thakur, and others of the Scheduled Caste League preferred to retain their ties with greater India and aligned with the Congress–Hindu Mahasabha combine that demanded the creation of West Bengal as a Bengali Hindu homeland within the Indian Union. Their support was contingent on a promise they had reportedly received from Gandhi and Nehru that if they were forced to migrate after Partition, their rehabilitation would be properly taken care of by the Indian state.

The Dalit peasants of East Bengal, for various reasons, did not migrate immediately after 1947. So, in post-Partition West Bengal, we do not see any powerful Dalit movement, as many of its main protagonists still lived on the other side of the international border drawn by the Radcliffe Award. But in post-Partition East Pakistan (known as East Bengal until 1956), the historic Dalit–Muslim alliance soon broke down under the pressure of rising Islamic nationalism and an economic crisis of unprecedented proportions. Jinnah's promise that all minorities would enjoy equal rights was forgotten after his death, as Mandal lamented in his letter of resignation from the Pakistan central cabinet in 1950. Mandal as well as his followers began to migrate to India after 1950—and by 1957, when the borders were sealed, 2.1 million people, mostly poor Dalit peasants, had crossed over to West Bengal. The loss of their territorial anchorage and the consequent displacement that it caused deprived them of that spatial capacity to mobilise, which they enjoyed in pre-Partition Bengal. In post-Partition West Bengal too they did not feel welcome. The worst sufferers of the Indian Partition were the Dalit peasants of East Bengal, as after 1947 they had no place which they could



affectionately call their homeland. However, we should add a rider here. Our study has mainly focused on the Namasudra community, as their habitat entirely went to East Pakistan, unlike that of the Rajbansis, who were also equally active in the SC movement in Bengal before Partition.

Conventional histories of Dalit self-assertion in India have rarely looked into the importance of space in such movements. In colonial Bengal, for both Namasudras and Rajbansis, their clustered geographical locations gave them that crucial spatial capacity for social mobilisation. Their community identities had emerged through the historic and affective relationship with that habitational space. The loss of that space and subsequent dispersal were major reasons for the decline of the Namasudra movement. The Rajbansis, comparatively, were less dispersed, as parts of their traditional habitat remained in West Bengal, where many of them eventually settled. And this gave them that capacity to mobilise once again for a more specific demand for an autonomous ethnic space in the form of Kamtapur or a separate state comprising six north Bengal districts. The dynamics of that movement remains outside the scope of this book. But the point that can perhaps be made is that because of this historic shift in the life trajectories of these two large Dalit communities, the organised SC movement shifted its course in the immediate post-Partition period in West Bengal.

To get back to our earlier point, it was the Namasudra community, which was particularly in a quandary after the announcement of the Radcliffe Award, as their entire habitational space went to Pakistan, despite the vigorous political campaign by a section of their leadership. But they did not immediately migrate, as the other section of their leaders, Mandal, and the AISC, believing in the historic Dalit–Muslim relationship, advised them not to. But that complicated relationship of the late colonial period seemingly broke down in the wake of Partition. Serious scarcity of resources and a savage competition for land, triggered by the arrival of thousands of Muhajir refugees from India, led to prolonged low-intensity violence that was meant to push the Dalit peasants out of their land and across the border to India. The Namasudra peasants finally decided to leave their land and hearth because they felt an acute sense of insecurity. It was not the kind of violence that was historically embedded in the structures of their relationship with Muslims—this violence was conjunctural, created by the specific historic circumstances produced by the Partition. For these peasants, migration was not an easy decision, as it represented a radical shift in their social existence. As one of our oral interviewees observed: ‘When we came to India, we got a new identity. We became refugees.’<sup>1</sup> But we argue that the

‘refugee’ was not a homogenous sociological category of people united by their shared experience of displacement. While the experience of dislodgment was the same, that of rehabilitation was not.

The westward migration did not solve any problems for the Dalit peasants of East Bengal. When they arrived in India after 1950, Nehru reneged on his promise, and there was no proper arrangement for their rehabilitation. While the *bhadralok* refugees of the first wave of migration in 1947–48 were resettled in and around Calcutta, when it came to these Dalit peasant refugees, first there was an attempt to send them back, and for that purpose, Nehru signed the Delhi Pact in April 1950 with his Pakistani counterpart, Liaquat Ali Khan. But when that attempt failed, it was decided that they would be first accommodated in fenced segregated transit camps and then dispersed across India. From then on, the struggle of these Dalit refugees focused entirely on the issue of rehabilitation.

Of those refugees who preferred the path of self-settlement, their struggle was of a different kind. Some of them crossed the border and took control of any vacant land that was available—in many cases, these were lands vacated by fleeing Muslims. They established here their makeshift colonies with bamboo huts and similar other constructions. In many cases, this involved violent clash with the local Muslims, particularly in the district of Nadia, where there was a virtual exchange of population, with the Muslims being pushed across the border and the SC population increasing manifold. In some cases, it also involved conflicts with the locally entrenched caste groups like the Goalas, who did not like the existing demographic balance being disturbed by newcomers. Clashes over land, harvest and cattle became regular features of daily life in this and other border districts. On the other hand, there were also more peaceful, organised enterprises, such as the one by the Namasudra leader P.R. Thakur, who, through his own initiative, founded the Thakurnagar colony on reclaimed land bought from the local landlords in north 24-Parganas. Others took advantage of the government loan scheme and bought land in the border districts to settle themselves in new colonies inhabited almost exclusively by Dalit refugees. In their new homes, these non-camp refugees regained the normalcy of life in a relatively short span of time.

But for those refugees who could not support themselves and entirely depended on the state, the struggle was much more prolonged and painful. They were sent to the transit or worksite camps where they endured privation and humiliation for some time and then protested against the lack of facilities and maladministration at the camps. These were, for them, new spaces of transitory existence that could never give them a sense of home. These overcrowded,

unhygienic, and unhealthy places of accommodation forced them to renegotiate their familiar community and regional identities, gender codes, and evolve new ethos of life and also selfhood. These dehumanising conditions, however, could not reduce them to bare biological existence. Instead, they showed remarkable resilience and agency and stubbornly asserted their rights, contesting the authority of the state. They were truly 'citizen refugees'—if we may use Udit Sen's phrase.<sup>2</sup> They organised themselves into Bastuhara Samitis, and launched prolonged protests against the lack of provision for hygiene and health, the bad quality of rations, stoppage of doles, and the arrogance of camp officials. They demanded relief and rehabilitation as a matter of right, not as an act of kindness, as they believed they had a natural right to citizenship of the new nation-state they had chosen for their future life. They thought they had a compact with the state, which had a responsibility to take care of their rehabilitation. And in these acts of self-assertion, refugee women in many camps took the front position, indicating the coming of new codes of gender freedom. This did not, of course, mean that they could completely come out of their gender-specific roles. But compared to their *bhadralok* counterparts in the colonies of Calcutta, Dalit refugee women in the camps showed greater signs of autonomy and agency.

There was another important aspect of this struggle of the camp refugees. As they were locked in an uneven relationship of power in the camps, they had to seek the mediation of mainstream opposition political parties and the umbrella refugee organisations that these parties controlled. This mediation made their voices heard and gave them limited access to the quarters of power, but that did not yield the desired result. On the contrary, such mediation contained the radical potential of their protests, which were kept within the acceptable limits of non-violent *satyagraha*. More importantly, the left-liberal ideologies of these organisations tended to suppress the caste question, although caste mattered very much in the camp's quotidian life. Unlike popular literary representations and some existing theoretical formulations, camp was not a leveller of social distinctions. But the compulsions of the protests compelled the camp refugees—70 per cent of them being Namasudras, Paundras, or other SCs—to wear a caste-neutral 'refugee' identity. As they got embroiled in the struggle for rehabilitation, the caste issue receded to the background. But that did not mean the caste question was resolved or declined. Their old caste identity and their new refugee selfhood mingled and overlapped in strange ways in the consciousness of these Dalit camp refugees.

Their main subject of concern at this stage was the state's rehabilitation policy, which was based on a politically expedient but factually wrong assumption that there was not enough excess

agricultural land in West Bengal where this migrant peasant population could be permanently rehabilitated. Several alternative plans were submitted, and opposition leaders reminded the government that there was enough waste land in the state that could be reclaimed for rehabilitation purposes. But that would require time and capital investment. The state government was not prepared to invest, and the central government did not want to wait. The latter was also eager to use refugee labour for development projects in areas where it was most needed. In short, rehabilitation was made conditional on providing services to the nation. So, in 1954, the state decided to disperse camp refugees—first to the Andaman Islands and the neighbouring states of Bihar and Orissa, and to some other states as well; then finally, after 1958, to Dandakaranya. The Dalit camp refugees preferred to be rehabilitated in West Bengal—the natural habitat that they could once again call home, because of its ecological, cultural, and linguistic affinity with the home they had left behind.

At this stage, refugee organisations like the UCRC led by CPI and the SBBS led by PSP came to their assistance and campaigned vigorously in support of their rehabilitation in West Bengal. But the Leftists had their own dilemmas, as they also had to look after their *Kisan* (peasant) front and there was a direct conflict of interest between the resident and migrant peasants, both making competing claims on the land. In the end, the *bhadralok* political elite across the ideological spectrum accepted the dispersal scheme as the only practical solution to Bengal's refugee problem. The Leftists abandoned the refugee movement against the Dandakaranya scheme when it was at its peak. The SBBS continued to support it, but it too began losing interest as the refugees in the camps became more desperate, radical, and violent. Jogendranath Mandal started his East India Refugee Council exclusively for Dalit refugees and launched a massive state-wide *satyagraha* movement in 1959. While the SBBS was still supporting him, he sought further support from the right-wing leaders of the Hindu Mahasabha and Jan Sangh. But these political groups during this period had limited clout in West Bengal politics. So, ultimately, in the absence of wider political support and lack of empathy from the general public, in October 1961, he too had to withdraw this movement. The Dalit camp-refugees hereafter were forced to move to Dandakaranya, which was still not ready for human settlement.

Where does the caste question figure in this story? It is difficult to ignore the fact that an overwhelming majority of these refugees belonged to a particular Dalit peasant caste, the Namasudras. And the way the state treated them was qualitatively different from the experiences of the groups of *savarna* migrants who had come earlier.

The story of the rehabilitation of these post-1950 refugees clearly established the fact that a convergence of inferior caste and class positions had constituted their marginality and expendability for the Indian state and the *savarna* political elite that controlled it.

This book argues that the experiences of migration, camp life, dispersal, and betrayal by all mainstream political parties made the migrant Dalit peasant refugees the worst victims of Partition. And this victimhood was not accidental or random but targeted. As they became refugees, their main struggle was for rehabilitation and citizenship, and their main protests were against the dispersal policy of the state. The issues of caste identity and discrimination were deliberately suppressed in the discourse of that refugee movement, but those issues never disappeared. Dispersal further reduced their spatial ability to mobilise. Today, a section of them are settled in the borderlands of North 24-Parganas and Nadia districts of West Bengal, while the rest are scattered throughout India—in Andaman Islands, Assam, Tripura, Bihar, Uttarakhand, Maharashtra, and the Dandakaranya area that lies at the intersection of the three states of Orissa, Chhattisgarh, and Madhya Pradesh. In most of these states, they do not even enjoy SC status.

As a result of this chequered historical trajectory of the Namasudra community—one of the main powerhouses behind the organised SC movement in the colonial period—that movement temporarily disappeared from the public space in post-Partition West Bengal. Its vigorous renewal in recent years, however, shows that it was never completely defeated; it only morphed into different forms. And this resurgence carefully uses this painful refugee past to re-invent their new Dalit selfhood. Nor was the caste question ever resolved, although many *bhadralok* want to believe that. There are hazards in offering a single factor analysis: we do not claim that Partition was the only reason for the enigmatic disappearance of caste movements in post-colonial West Bengal. But it was certainly one of the major factors.

<sup>1</sup> Sonarpur group meeting on 26 January 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Udit Sen, *Citizen Refugee: Forging the Indian Nation After Partition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018.

## Epilogue: Riot, Massacre, and the Recovery of Self

The main narrative of this book ends in 1961 when the first phase of the Dandakaranya project was completed and the refugee movement against that dispersal plan was withdrawn. But the Dalit refugees' struggle for survival and search for home did not end there. Nor could their community leaders secure for themselves any foothold in the crowded domain of *bhadralok*-controlled mainstream politics in post-Partition West Bengal. Their sense of disappointment and frustration with the established political parties increased as they were let down by all. In this Epilogue, we provide a short narrative of some of those challenges and struggles of the Dalit refugees in the post-dispersal period. It is not a comprehensive account, nor based on intensive research, but only indicative of areas for future enquiry.

### Hazratbal Riot and Politics

Among the two prominent Dalit leaders, P.R. Thakur's point of departure from the Congress came in 1964. Initially an enthusiastic supporter of the Congress and a champion of its rehabilitation policies, he had been successful in the Assembly elections of 1957 and 1962 as a Congress candidate, and in 1962 he was appointed Minister of State in charge of the Welfare of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. But before he could do much, he lost this ministerial position as his fortunes ran out after the sudden death of Chief Minister (CM) B.C. Roy on 1 July 1962. Roy was succeeded by Prafulla Sen as the new CM, and Thakur was not in his good book. So, he lost his ministerial position in mid-1963 and was gradually marginalised within the new Congress power structure.<sup>1</sup> In 1964, he was finally convinced that the solemn pledge that he had received from Gandhi and Nehru about the rehabilitation of SC refugees had been breached. So, the time for him to reclaim his autonomous Dalit identity had arrived. It became imminent when another major riot erupted that year in East Pakistan, triggering a fresh wave of mass Dalit migration.

In reality, Dalit peasant migration had never stopped, even though the border was sealed in 1957. But the Indian state did not recognise these migrants as refugees and refused to offer any relief or rehabilitation to those who came after March 1958. Yet, between April 1958 and December 1963, about 250,000 people entered India from East Pakistan; they had to fend for themselves.<sup>2</sup> Then, in 1964,

West Bengal received a fresh avalanche of migration. On 26 December 1963, Prophet Muhammad's sacred relic (a hair) was reported stolen from the Hazratbal mosque in Srinagar, Kashmir. As the news broke out, the entire Kashmir valley went on a complete strike for six days. Processions were taken out in Srinagar by citizens from across religious boundaries, i.e. by Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs. And slogans they chanted expressed suspicion about a deep political conspiracy, presumably emanating from the other side of the border.<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly, although there was no news of any major unrest in the adjacent areas of West Pakistan, retaliatory violence broke out in the East, first in Khulna, on 3 January, targeting non-Muslims. On that day, one person was killed, and several were injured, shops and houses were looted in Khulna town. According to an official press note, this was done by a group of mill workers about 20,000 strong. A nearby village called Daulatpur was also attacked and several houses and shops were looted or burned. The Down Barisal Express arrived at Sealdah station the next day with fresh groups of refugees who spoke of harrowing tales about atrocities on the minorities in Khulna.<sup>4</sup> Although the relic was recovered on 4 January, this did not pacify the rioters in Khulna. The following day and the day after, there were further reports of deaths in Khulna town and the adjoining villages, and the rioting now spread to Jessore, and eventually to Dacca. Now, refugees also started crossing the border on foot.<sup>5</sup>

The question, however, still remains as to why, of all places, Khulna reacted so violently to the Hazratbal incident and the answer possibly lies in the social demography of the district. At the time of Partition, the Hindus of this district had a slight majority over the Muslims. According to the Census of 1941, Hindus constituted 50.3 per cent and Muslims 49.35 per cent of the district's population.<sup>6</sup> So the non-Muslims, particularly the Hindus, vehemently protested against Khulna being placed in Pakistan by the Radcliffe Award. They pleaded for Khulna to be exchanged for Murshidabad, which was a Muslim majority district in India.<sup>7</sup> But the pleas were ignored, and following Partition, the demography of Khulna changed very little: according to the 1951 Pakistan census, Hindus represented 45.2 per cent and Muslims 54.55 per cent of Khulna's population. We should also note here that the SCs accounted for 71.2 per cent of the Hindu population of Khulna.<sup>8</sup> So, obviously, more demographic cleansing was necessary to set the communal balance right. But there was possibly another reason too behind this outbreak of violence. In late 1963, the Assam government expelled thousands of Muslims whom it described as 'illegal Pakistani immigrants.' These people brought discontent to East Pakistan, and when the Hazratbal incident occurred, the mullahs sprang into action to instigate violence against



the minorities. What was significant, many of the victims of this violence directed their fingers of accusation at these migrants from Assam and Bihar, rather than their Bengali Muslim neighbours.<sup>9</sup> As in the earlier years, a brutal contest for scarce space was possibly a prime reason behind this widespread violence that was meant to push the minorities towards the other side of the border.

According to one report, the refugees who came to India in 1964 included all non-Muslims, e.g. Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, and others, and by March they were coming at the rate of 3,000 a day.<sup>10</sup> While some of them went to the north-eastern states, the majority came to West Bengal. In 1964, in all 693,000 people crossed the border into India, and of them, 419,000 came to West Bengal.<sup>11</sup> Some of the members of the Legislative Assembly, therefore, demanded that the Prime Minister offer the minorities in East Pakistan full migration facilities.<sup>12</sup> At the end of January, after an all-party meeting in Calcutta, the Government of India (GI) agreed to take responsibility for those who were crossing the border. But it would not open any more relief camps in West Bengal. The migrants would be received at the border checkpoints, taken to Sealdah station for registration, and from there, in special trains, transported directly to Dandakaranya.<sup>13</sup> Some of them were also taken to the Northern Andaman, where they joined the workforce to clear the forests; later they were rehabilitated on the land they cleared.<sup>14</sup>

A remarkable feature of the post-1964 refugee influx was that only about 40 per cent of them asked for state support, while the rest preferred self-rehabilitation. Those who needed support were taken to Dandakaranya from 4 February. They were first transported by rail to Raipur station and then were taken by buses or trucks to Mana transit camp, located on a World War II airfield about 9 miles away from the station. On arrival, they were given accommodation and meals for two days. Then, after registration and vaccination, they were put up in tents, with a cash dole which ranged from Rs. 30 for an individual to a maximum of Rs. 70 for a family.<sup>15</sup> But as endless streams of refugees were brought to Mana, by March, the conditions there became even worse than in the West Bengal transit camps. It was built to accommodate 10,000 families, and by the middle of March, it was nearly full. It presented 'a Sealdah look', wrote a special correspondent of the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*.<sup>16</sup> As another report suggests, the Dandakaranya authorities were overwhelmed by the numbers and had 'no other alternative than to put the new migrants straight under the sun'. On 16 March 1964, social worker Asoka Gupta sent a frantic message to Mrs A.J. Mathai, the Chairperson of the Central Social Welfare Board, telling her that 'the situation was getting bad to worse daily with the influx increasing up to a thousand

per day.’ As her report further pointed out, the concentration of so many refugees ‘in a small area raises many problems of sanitation, water supply, hospitals, schools, markets, and shops.’ Particularly about health, ‘with thousands of families living in tents and directly under the sun in a congested area and in indigent circumstances’, the situation was alarming and fast ‘getting out of control’, particularly affecting children and aged people.<sup>17</sup> But no additional relief was immediately sent. The situation remained so bad that by August about 19,000 refugees deserted the camp and went back to West Bengal, allegedly because of the scarcity of water and excessive hot climate. In August, the Mana camp was declared to be full and fresh refugees were diverted to Mandala camp near Jabalpur in Madhya Pradesh.<sup>18</sup> The conditions in Madhya Pradesh camps were no better. According to one report, between May and August, 114 children died in those camps.<sup>19</sup>

The more immediate problem for the government was to resettle the refugees as quickly as possible and not to keep them in transit camps for a very long period. But the amount of land at the disposal of the Dandakaranya Development Authority (DDA) was not enough to rehabilitate this additional and continuing stream of fresh refugees. As Union Rehabilitation Minister Mehr Chand Khanna anticipated, an additional 80,000–150,000 acres of land was required, and for this the state governments of Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madras, Mysore, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh were approached.<sup>20</sup> But the other hurdles that impeded speedy rehabilitation were maladministration and corruption that plagued the DDA. Unable to streamline it, its Chairman, an utterly frustrated Saibal Kumar Gupta, resigned in September, but the new Rehabilitation Minister Mahavir Tyagi refused to take his complaints seriously or shake up the DDA.<sup>21</sup> Instead, to contain numbers, he announced that from 1 November, no one crossing the border without a migration certificate would be given any relief or rehabilitation. Under pressure from the West Bengal government, implementation of this order was later postponed. In the meantime, refugees continued to pour in.<sup>22</sup>

By November 1964, the government claimed that 750,000 refugees had crossed over to India, but of them, only about one-third were taken to Dandakaranya or other places outside of West Bengal. The rest remained in West Bengal, and a large number of those coming from the district of Rajshahi settled in north Bengal. But despite that, the GI could not cope with the pressure. In November, it announced a new policy of not offering agricultural land to peasant refugees. Instead, it planned to rehabilitate them into non-agricultural employment, and funded a few industrial units, and promoted small-

scale industries in Dandakaranya for that purpose.<sup>23</sup> Yet, that did not resolve the problem of economic rehabilitation of East Bengali refugees any sooner, and desertion from Dandakaranya continued to create the next major crisis of refugee rehabilitation in 1978–79. We will return to that story shortly.

Meanwhile, let us discuss the other major fall out of the refugee influx in 1964. These refugees brought with them some horrendous stories of riots in East Pakistan and that incited people in West Bengal, which too witnessed a spurt in communal tension. In Calcutta, full-scale anti-Muslim riots started on 10 January and in two days, sixty people were killed. People were also agitated in the border districts of 24-Parganas and Nadia, where there was a large migrant population. The Namasudra migrants in these areas and refugee camps, with fresh memories of such violence in their own not too distant past, seemed to be more easily inflammable. Their not-so-concealed anti-Muslim feelings (see [Chapter 2](#)) must have added fuel to an already combustible situation. So, as a precautionary measure, a dawn-to-dusk curfew was clamped on Namasudra majority areas like Bongaon town and Habra in 24-Parganas and Dhubulia camp, Taherpur colony, and Cooper's camp in Ranaghat in Nadia. Some of the refugees from Dhubulia and Cooper's camp, who were arrested for being involved in the disturbances, had their doles stopped. But even in spite of all those precautionary measures, twenty-six Muslims and three Hindus were killed in rioting in the 24-Parganas; the corresponding figures for Nadia were two Muslims and eight Hindus. Police firing further killed three Hindus and two Muslims in the 24-Parganas.<sup>24</sup> This articulation of a Hindu communal identity was not a new but a continuing trait of a section of the SC population of Bengal since the early 1940s, and it came out once again to the foreground as an unfortunate fall out of the riots of 1964.

To bring the situation under control, police took further repressive measures, specifically targeting the Namasudra refugees who were taking their revenge on the local Muslims. There were reported cases of police atrocities in the 24-Parganas, including rape and incidents of sexual harassment against Namasudra women in the Bongaon area. P.R. Thakur wanted the government to take immediate measures to stop police brutalities against his community. According to one report, when he received no response, he resigned from Congress and the Assembly on 6 March 1964 as a mark of protest against the inaction of the government against attacks on refugees in Bongaon.<sup>25</sup> According to *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, however, he did not immediately resign, but only wrote letters to the CM and the General Secretary of the Congress Parliamentary Party, 'expressing his desire to resign from the Congress Assembly Party'. Having received his complaint, the CM instructed the

IG of Police to investigate the matter. The Sub-Inspector involved was immediately suspended and the Superintendent of Police personally apologised to Thakur. But since the CM himself did not respond, Thakur handed in copies of his letters to the press and an opposition leader. In retaliation, on 14 March, he was expelled from the Congress parliamentary party on disciplinary grounds and the West Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee (WBPC), as well as AICC, were recommended to take further action.<sup>26</sup> Whether Thakur resigned before or after being expelled from the parliamentary party is a non-question. The most important fact was, he finally got estranged from the Congress. He then participated in a series of meetings with opposition leaders demanding proper rehabilitation of the Namasudra refugees in the border districts of West Bengal.

At this stage, Thakur got involved in the activities of fringe political groups like the Civil Liberties Committee and Save Pakistan Minorities Committee, which deliberately kept communal tension high in the province. These organisations were led by politicians like Haripada Bharati and Soumyendranath Tagore, who were proposing to expel 500,000 Muslims who were all suspected to be 'Pakistani spies'. They also wanted the government to impose an economic blockade on East Pakistan and arm the Hindus in the border areas to ensure the country's security.<sup>27</sup> In meetings organised by these groups, Thakur condemned police excesses against the Namasudras in Habra police station and demanded that, as a martial class, the Namasudras should be allowed to settle in border districts and should be trained in handling arms. In some of his utterances, he was real explosive, describing the CM as 'a third-class man' and offering to supply volunteers to squat on the railway tracks to stop trains to Pakistan.<sup>28</sup> So, on charges of inciting public disturbances, the West Bengal Government arrested him on 19 April under the Defence of India Rules; a few days later, on 30 April, Jogendranath Mandal was arrested too under the same rules.<sup>29</sup> And both were kept incarcerated in DumDum Central Jail until 3 June.<sup>30</sup> It was ironic that the two Dalit leaders of Bengal, estranged since the days of Partition, finally met each other physically in a jail of free India.

Did this usher in a convergence of the separate paths of the two rival leaders of the Bengal SC movement in the interest of united action for Dalit empowerment? We do not really know for certain what happened behind the prison gates. According to one source, in the Assembly by-election of 1964 in the Hanskhali constituency—which was vacated by Thakur a few months ago—Thakur supported Mandal against the Congress candidate.<sup>31</sup> A close confidante of Mandal, who worked for him during the election campaign, also remembered that Thakur wrote to his followers to vote for Mandal.<sup>32</sup>

But possibly it was too late, and despite that support, Mandal did not win this election. And also, the political paths traversed by the two leaders did not converge either, as Mandal at this stage joined the Republican Party, following the Ambedkarite path. In the 1967 election, he contested in Barasat parliamentary constituency in the district of 24-Parganas as a candidate of the Republican Party, which was formed in West Bengal in 1963 with Mandal as the President. In this election he suffered from several disadvantages: he was not a local and was not supported this time by any local leader like Thakur. And his new party did not have a chance to build its organisational infrastructure to match Leftist mobilisation that was well underway for some time in this region. So, in this election too he lost to a CPI candidate.<sup>33</sup> In 1968, for the last time, Mandal tried to test his fortunes in electoral politics by contesting a mid-term election in Bongaon, which was largely populated by Namasudra migrant settlers. But in the middle of the election campaign, he died on 5 October. He thus never had an electoral victory after he migrated to post-Partition West Bengal.<sup>34</sup>

Thakur on the other hand remained with the mainstream politics, joined the breakaway Bangla Congress formed by veteran Gandhian Ajoy Mukherjee, and became its Vice President. In 1967, he contested the election as a candidate of the Bangla Congress in the Lok Sabha constituency of Nabadwip and won by 89,000 votes in a direct contest against his Congress rival.<sup>35</sup> This result surprised no one, as the constituency had a large concentration of SC refugees from East Pakistan and they all supported Thakur. It also demonstrated that in order to win an election in a reserved SC constituency, a Congress stamp of approval was not necessary. But electoral mobilisation follows a different logic, as voters do not vote just based on community affiliation. Thakur also found out soon that his electoral support base was gradually shifting. The 1967 election was the last election that he won; in the two subsequent parliamentary elections in 1971 and 1977, he lost to Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)] candidates,<sup>36</sup> indicating a decisive Leftist takeover of the refugee and Dalit constituencies, both merging into a vote bank that remained intact for the Left until 2009. This leftward drift was a complicated paradigm that cannot be explained by any simple theory, and we will not venture into that territory either. We may only mention here that this shift did not mean that the Dalit refugees got a fair deal from the Left Front government that came to power in West Bengal in 1977 with CPI(M) on the driving seat.

## **Marichjhanpi Massacre**

Of the places where the East Bengali Dalit refugees were rehabilitated, Andaman was a success story. Desertion from Andaman was difficult because of the sea voyage involved. But more importantly, the Namasudra migrant peasants in the Andaman Islands, instead of being emotionally locked in a distant and displaced past, firmly established themselves in their new habitat as pioneer cultivators. They conquered the dense forests, fought with the wild animals, and negotiated with the fierce Jarawas to establish for themselves a new identity of 'settler'.<sup>37</sup> Their caste identity and the common faith in the Matua transcendental philosophy gave them emotional support and a sense of recreating home by connecting them to their larger community.<sup>38</sup> But the case of Dandakaranya was different. Desertion from Dandakaranya was a 'regular feature' since 1965; by 1978, 16,211 families had deserted from these uninhabitable terrains. The political ascendancy of the Left parties, which once championed the cause of the camp refugees and forcefully argued in favour of their rehabilitation in West Bengal, did indeed provide the impetus for desertion. They sold their properties and prepared for their journey back to their desired homeland in West Bengal. About 10,000 families, mostly Namasudras, returned to West Bengal between January and March 1978. Apart from political optimism, there were also many other reasons behind their desertion, which Saibal Kumar Gupta and later Alok Ghosh have described in detail.<sup>39</sup> We will briefly re-state them below.

The refugees deserted Dandakaranya, first of all, because of the lack of planning and poor execution of the project. Although each agricultural family was given six and a half acres of land and some cash loans to buy implements and bullocks and for house building, in most cases, the land was difficult to cultivate, given the perpetual drought conditions and the absence of irrigation and other infrastructural facilities. As Gupta pointed out, the land that was released for the refugees was 'hitherto considered as uncultivable', while the local *adivasis* occupied the 'fertile low-lying areas ... enriched by silt and moisture'. The irrigation projects undertaken by the DDA did not benefit the refugee holdings as much as they benefited the land held by the local tribal population. As a result, on an average, only 20 per cent of the land occupied by the refugees yielded 15 *maunds* (1 maund = 37 kg) per acre, while 80 per cent of their land yielded from only 2 to 7 maunds per acre. As Gupta argued, it was 'a poor enough yield to sustain an agricultural economy even on a minimum level of subsistence'. This was confirmed in the report published in 1963 by an Agricultural Expert Team appointed by the Food and Agriculture Ministry of the GI. Also, the settlers were not given secure tenancy rights (*patta*) for the land to allow them to

develop ties to it. The delay was because the government could not make its mind whether to charge the settlers for the cost of reclamation and development of the land. When agriculture could not provide adequate sustenance, the refugees looked for other sources of income, but there were not many in the region. Business loans were given, but there were very few trading opportunities in the region. The industries that were set up by the DDA were ‘amateurish, uneconomical, reckless’ and the employments they generated were ‘sporadic’ and at a ‘low level’, and the wages remained ‘scandalously low’. On the other hand, those who were recruited as cheap labour to clear forests, kill animals, construct roads, dig ponds, or break rocks, had to work on insufficient daily wages and in extremely inhospitable conditions. Then there were the human factors: the hostility of the local Gond tribal population, unkind behaviour of the local officials of the DDA, the compulsion to learn the local languages at schools, and the step-motherly attitudes particularly of the Orissa government officials who resented outsiders being settled in Dandakaranya.<sup>40</sup> The DDA never addressed any of these issues and for every failure blamed the ‘bad husbandry’ and ‘sluggishness’ of the Bengali refugees.<sup>41</sup>

When in 1977–78 about 120,000 deserters arrived in West Bengal, the local police detained them at Hasnabad railway station and tried to send them back to Dandakaranya. But from 18 April 1978, about 30,000 families, organised by the Utbastu Unnayanshil Samiti under the leadership of a Namasudra refugee, Satish Mandal (who was once close to UCRC), surreptitiously and desperately began to cross the river and arrive at Marichjhanpi, a 125 square kilometres uninhabited island in the Sunderbans, about seventy-five kilometres east of Calcutta.<sup>42</sup> There was no surprise in their preference for the Sunderbans, since in historical times they used to go to the Sunderbans as pioneer cultivators and, for that reason, they had caste and kinship ties with the local settlers. Also, the memories of Herobhanga and Jharkhali refugee settlements were still fresh in their minds. The UCRC alternative refugee resettlement plan adopted at Cooper’s camp in December 1957 and submitted to the government in 1958 had mentioned Sunderbans as a possible resettlement site for the camp refugees (see [Chapter 4](#) for these details). In a letter to P.C. Sen on 13 July 1961, Jyoti Basu again proposed that the refugees could be settled among other places in ‘Herobhanga Second Scheme’.<sup>43</sup> In 1974, at the UCRC meeting in Mana Camp, a resolution was adopted in favour of refugee resettlement in the Sunderban areas; the meeting was attended by Samar Mukherjee, a member of the CPI(M) Polit Bureau. Then, on 25 January 1975, Jyoti Basu himself announced at a workers’ meeting in Bhilai in Madhya Pradesh that the refugees from Dandakaranya could be settled in the Sunderbans, and if elected his



government would initiate that resettlement process.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, after the subsequent electoral victory of the Left Front, a delegation of refugees from Dandakaranya came to meet the new CM Jyoti Basu in Calcutta on 17 December 1977, and they were again told to settle down in the Sunderbans.<sup>45</sup> Hereafter, in a statement issued on behalf of the Udbastu Unnayanshil Samiti on 22 January 1978, its President Satish Mandal claimed that Ram Chatterjee, a Minister in the Left Front government, representing Marxist Forward Bloc, a partner in the Left Front, and Ashok Ghosh, the General Secretary of Forward Bloc, visited Dandakaranya between 16 and 19 January and in four meetings, they told the refugees to get ready to move back to West Bengal in order to be resettled in the Sunderbans. 'Be ready the call for freedom will come soon, and it will free you from exile', Mandal assured his followers.<sup>46</sup> Soon after that he raised the slogan '*Sunderban chalo*' (Onward to Sunderban!), allegedly at the instigation of Chatterjee.<sup>47</sup>

Amal Sarkar, a refugee leader, told the Bengali media that they wanted to settle down only in the Sunderbans and nowhere else.<sup>48</sup> This was presumably because of its physical proximity to the border with Bangladesh, from where they had originally migrated. Moreover, the topography and ecology of the delta area resembled their original homeland in the marshy *bil* tracts of Barisal and Faridpur, which they had reclaimed, colonised, and lived in for more than a hundred years. Here they could use their skills as pioneer cultivators and so did not need any financial help from the state. They only expected recognition of their right to settle down in West Bengal, wherein three to six months' time they would demonstrate their entrepreneurial skills. They were not only capable of self-rehabilitation, Sarkar claimed, but could also assist the state in achieving self-sufficiency in the production of rice and fish. They kept their words. In Marichjhanpi, within a few months, in collaboration with the inhabitants of the neighbouring islands with whom they had 'blood ties' and caste affinity, they built twelve settlements, with roads, drainage, school, dispensary, market, and a dike system to hold the tide.<sup>49</sup> At last these enterprising Namasudra refugees hoped that their dream of rehabilitation in West Bengal would be realised, as a Left Front government was now in power! For a long time, the communists and the UCRC had been nurturing this hope and kept the dream of a homeland alive.<sup>50</sup>

But the dream soon turned into a nightmare, as after coming to power the CPI(M)'s policy towards these refugees had seemingly changed. Now the Left Front government wanted to send them back to Dandakaranya, and when they refused, an economic blockade was imposed on the island from 26 January 1979, prohibiting entry of

food, medicine, and even drinking water. The UCRC leaders were instructed not to take relief to the island and their pleas to change the policy were sternly rejected.<sup>51</sup> Urgent messages were sent to the Prime Minister and the MPs to stop this illegal blockade; but there was no intervention.<sup>52</sup> On 31 January 1979, the police fired upon the refugees, resulting in thirty-six deaths. A fringe political group called *Amra Bangali* (We the Bengalis) secured an injunction from the High Court against the economic blockade, but the state government chose to ignore it. Armed CPI(M) volunteers were deployed to invade the island and intimidate the refugees. Finally, on 14 May 1979, the police, with the help of political cadres, surrounded the island with thirty launches and forcibly removed the refugee settlers, burning their huts, and destroying everything they had painstakingly built in the last eighteen months. Survivors recall people fleeing into the forest to save themselves and ‘could see houses burning, the hospital burning, the school burning, humanity burning.’ ‘From Debjani launch’, says one of them, ‘we learned that they threw dead bodies somewhere in the river-bed and the tiger might have eaten them up.’<sup>53</sup> What happened on this day was described by Rangalal Goldar, a leader of the Udbastu Unnayanshil Samiti, as ‘a reign of terror’, while A.K. Sen, the Chief Secretary of the Government of West Bengal claimed that ‘no police action had been necessary’.<sup>54</sup> There was hardly any public furore over what happened. The opposition parties staged a walkout in the Assembly; the Congress and the Janata Party made press statements condemning the mistreatment of refugees. But there was no protest march on the streets of Calcutta by any political party or by civil society. Soon, the government had the High Court case quashed with the help of a pliant judge.<sup>55</sup> A few journalists writing in favour of the refugees were silenced through government pressure. Sunil Ganguly, one of the few Bengali journalists who wrote about Marichjhanpi, lamented on behalf of the civil society in a rare admission of guilt and remorse: ‘It was a matter of grief that we worried more about Palestinian refugees, but did not think of the refugees in Dandakaranya.’<sup>56</sup>

This public silence and subsequent amnesia were remarkable, given the magnitude of casualties caused by this violent encounter, widely known as a ‘massacre’. Although Ashok Mitra, the then Finance Minister in the Left Front government, considered the use of the word ‘massacre’ to be a ‘hyperbole’,<sup>57</sup> we will prefer to use it, as that is how the victims of this incident and their progeny still remember it. It is difficult for researchers to put in a definite figure for casualties because there is no documentary evidence. The archival records remain classified, and the media, although initially made headlines of what was happening in this remote Sunderban island, were eventually

subjected to informal censorship and the government at one point blocked the journalists and opposition leaders from getting access to the island. There was an extraordinary official denial that lay behind this nearly total information blackout. Oral evidence of the victims would put the number of deaths between 1,700 and 10,000. Kanti Ganguly, the Minister of Sunderban Affairs in the Left Front government at that time, would describe these numbers as 'fictional' and would put his own casualty figure at 'less than ten'. And Amiya Samanta, the Superintendent of Police who was in charge of Operation Marichjhanpi, would assert that only one person was killed and that too because of misfiring after the police station was attacked by the refugees.<sup>58</sup> According to Ashok Mitra's 'recollection', 'no killings took place on this spot'. Later, 'a couple of deaths' occurred due to conflict with the police, but that happened in other places, away from Marichjhanpi.<sup>59</sup>

It is futile to look for 'truth' in these memories of people firmly entrenched in opposing subjective positions. As Annu Jalais has observed: 'We shall never know exactly how many people had lost their lives.'<sup>60</sup> One should remember however those people died not just because of firing, but also because of starvation, malnutrition, and diseases. Nilanjana Chatterjee and Ross Mallick pointed out that 4,128 or nearly 5,000 families or about 17,000 refugees had failed to return to Dandakaranya; they were either 'missing' or 'presumed dead'. And those who were repatriated to Dandakaranya, they continued to experience 'everyday Marichjhanpi'.<sup>61</sup>

All these evicted refugees were first taken to Hasnabad railway station and from there by special trains transported back to Dandakaranya. According to DDA figures, 25,255 displaced East Bengali families were rehabilitated in Dandakaranya by 1985.<sup>62</sup> Many of them gradually settled down in life through their own initiative. Where they found fertile soil and adequate infrastructure, they managed to create 'an east Bengal countryside'.<sup>63</sup> As Subhasri Ghosh has argued: 'Many of the residents, who weathered the adversities in the initial days, have found stability and do not regret their decision to stay back.' But some still looked for an ideal home.<sup>64</sup> Some again managed to desert, this time silently and discretely. The massacre of Marichjhanpi remains alive in Dalit refugee memory as a festering wound and constitutes the most bizarre and the most baffling part of the saga of Dalit refugee rehabilitation in West Bengal.

But how do we explain the *volte face* on the part of the Leftist parties? It was possible that many of their leaders feared that Marichjhanpi might become a precedent and encourage more desertion, and if all those refugees came back from Dandakaranya, it might jeopardise the state's already vulnerable economy. Also, the

Sunderbans had in the meanwhile been declared a Reserve Forest area where a Project Tiger was launched in 1973 with the sponsorship of the World Wildlife Fund. So, the refugees by settling down there and by clearing part of the forestland were seemingly breaking the Forest Preservation Act.<sup>65</sup> As it has been pointed out, their action was now considered to be criminal trespass, while in the past squatter movement of the *savarna* refugees in Calcutta was hailed as noble dissent. However, Annu Jalais has pointed out that Marichjhanpi was not even part of the tiger project and the Mangrove forest had already been cleared in this part of the Sunderban and was replaced by a government-sponsored programme of coconut and tamarisk plantation. So, the whole ecology and conservationist argument was perhaps framed to placate Calcutta *bhadralok* sensibilities.<sup>66</sup>

A journalist, Niranjan Haldar, suspected that it was ‘politics, not ecology’ which was the real reason behind this stark discriminatory attitude towards these refugee settlers of Marichjhanpi. First of all, the CPI(M) wanted the Udbastu Unnayansil Samiti, which mobilised the Dandakaranya refugees, to remain loyal to it, but the Samiti refused to be affiliated with any political party in order to maintain its autonomy. Also, the party wanted the refugees to stay in Dandakaranya in the states of Orissa and Madhya Pradesh and vote for it, so that its political influence could be extended beyond West Bengal.<sup>67</sup> There was also another possibility: since the junior partners of the Left Front like the Revolutionary Socialist Party or Forward Bloc (Marxist) were closer to this particular group of refugees, the more dominant partner CPI(M) became disinterested in them.<sup>68</sup> In this context, we should remember that the opposition parties also did precious little to help these refugees. This remarkable silence, apathy and subsequent amnesia possibly further confirm our earlier argument made in [Chapter 5](#) that the *bhadralok* politicians across the ideological spectrum had convinced themselves by 1960 that by sending the Dalit camp refugees to Dandakaranya they would solve West Bengal’s refugee problem once and for all. They now simply refused to reopen the books.

And behind this stubborn attitude of antipathy hanged uncomfortably the caste question. In an open letter in *Anadabazar Patrika*, Aurobinda Mistry, the Joint Secretary of the Udbastu Unnayansil Samiti wrote: ‘Caste Hindus live in other squatter colonies, and there were only Scheduled Castes at Marichjhanpi. Is that why there is no space for the people of Marichjhanpi in this state?’<sup>69</sup> The Dalit activist writer Manoranjan Byapari, whose father was beaten up badly at Marichjhanpi, also thinks that ‘Caste hatred led to Marichjhapi massacre’. Of course, CPI(M) leader Kanti Ganguly would vehemently deny it: ‘You can call us Leftists anything you want to, but

you can't call us communal or casteists.'<sup>70</sup> It is impossible to provide any documentary evidence to prove that institutional casteism might have worked behind the Left Front policy in Marichjhanpi. We can only pose a counter-factual question: if the settlers were Banerjees, Mukherjees, Boses, Mitras, Senguptas, and Dasguptas or in other words, if they belonged to the three traditional higher castes of Bengal who mostly constituted the elite *bhadralok*, would the responses of the government and civil society be the same? The answer, we think, should be an emphatic no. And there lies the caste factor, which should impel the *savarna bhadralok* to introspect about their latent casteism that remains deeply embedded in their overtly elitist culture.

It was because of a long tradition of refugee movement led by the Leftists (discussed in [Chapter 5](#)) that these mostly Namasudra refugees even at the height of the Marichjhanpi crisis did not articulate their Dalit identity. As Nilanjana Chatterjee pointed out, their use of slogans like '*Amra kara? Bastuhara!*' (Who are we? Refugees!) or '*Udbastu aikyo zindabad*' (Long live the unity of the refugees!) spoke of a deliberate privileging of the overarching self-definition of 'refugee'.<sup>71</sup> As we have argued before, this was because of a left-liberal hegemony over refugee movement in the 1950s. But that does not take away the fact that the majority of these refugees belonged to Dalit castes and their treatment at the hands of the state was strikingly different from the treatment meted out to the earlier *savarna* squatter refugees. In reality, the Dalit refugees suffered more than the other refugees and did not get a fair deal from any of the established political parties. Yet, they have continued to depend on them, as their battle was so uneven. But by doing so they restricted the agenda, intensity and consequently the extent of success of their own movement. The story of their rehabilitation thus became the saddest saga in the long history of Partition in Bengal.

## Recovery of Dalit Selfhood

With the Marichjhanpi massacre ended the dream of a large section of the Namasudra refugees to build their new home in West Bengal. Their political struggle for physical space in West Bengal—their perceived natural cultural homeland—was vigorously pushed by Jogendranath Mandal in the late 1950s. That battle virtually ended with the withdrawal of that movement in 1961, and it was truly over after Mandal's sudden death in 1968. If the dream was kept alive by a few leaders of the Udbastu Unnayanshil Samiti in Dandakaranya, after Marichjhanpi that dream was completely shattered, once and for all. Now, while some of the Dalit refugees from East Bengal have self-rehabilitated in the border districts of Nadia and North 24-Parganas,

many of them have been dispersed across large parts of eastern and central India and the Andaman Islands. In some of these states, they are not even recognised as SC and do not enjoy the constitutional rights entitled to them.

But when the hopes for physical space for a new homeland were dashed, P.R. Thakur initiated a new endeavour to construct a spiritual space where he could unite this dispersed Namasudra community by giving them an emotional anchorage and a sense of home. Possibly, Thakur's contributions as a spiritual leader were historically more significant for his community than his political manoeuvres as a Congress leader. When he was arrested in 1964, he was described in a police report as a leader with 'considerable influence upon the refugees of East Pakistan, particularly upon the Namasudra community'.<sup>72</sup> But this 'influence' was not that of a political leader, as all those who protested against his arrest, participated in hunger strikes, and sent petitions for his release, described him as a religious guru, the *Mahasanghadhipati* or head of the Matua Mahasangha (MM), whose incarceration had seriously disrupted the religious life of the sect.<sup>73</sup> In other words, his influence was not because of his politics, but owing to his hereditary role as the spiritual guru of a heterodox religious sect, which had once initiated a powerful organised Dalit protest movement in rural East Bengal. To this sect, most of the Namasudra refugees still remained devotionally loyal, and in a real sense 'Matua' became a new marker of their distinctive social identity. After being disenchanted with the Congress and retiring from active politics, Thakur focused more on this socio-religious movement, further expanding its scope, reach, and activities.

Thakur started visiting Dalit refugee camps and colonies, not only in West Bengal, but also in Andaman and Dandakaranya. In 1986, he had the MM formally registered as a socio-religious organisation to preach the messages of Harichand and Guruchand—his great-grandfather and grandfather—who had started and consolidated the sect in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was meant to mobilise the dispersed Namasudra community and convert Thakurnagar into a new cultural and spiritual hub for a Namasudra renaissance, reminiscent of the olden glorious days of Orakandi.<sup>74</sup> After his death in 1990, his son Kapil Krishna established a centre at village Ashti in the district of Gadchiroli in Maharashtra. This centre was intended to mobilise the Namasudra refugees who had settled in central and south India in the 1960s. In 2008, the MM had 6,755 branches all over India; and in 2010, it claimed to have nearly 50 million members, belonging to 100,000 to 120,000 families.<sup>75</sup> On the occasion of *baruni mela*—the major festival of the sect—thousands of Dalit devotees from all over India visit Thakurnagar in their annual

pilgrimage. In 2011, Madhumita Mazumdar saw in the Andaman Islands how the Namasudra refugee settlers reinvented 'a sense of home' and reconnected with their wider community in the mainland by sharing the common spiritual space that the MM had offered them.<sup>76</sup>

The reinvented MM thus offered a newly imagined space for a geographically dispersed and socially divided community to recover their distinctive Dalit selfhood in post-Partition India. The weight of their numbers, because of this social mobilisation, again began to compel mainstream political parties in West Bengal to take note of their presence in electoral politics. However, as in the past, this alignment with and dependence on mainstream political parties once again compromised their political agendas, divided their leadership, and to a large extent, weakened their social movement.<sup>77</sup> But these latest developments require more research, and this discussion should therefore wait for a future occasion.

Another important recent development that is also pertinent to this story of the recovery of Dalit selfhood is the emergence of a new literary movement, contributed to by Dalit writers for Dalit audiences. Drawing on the earlier literary tradition of Matua writings of the 1930s and 1940s, and inspired by the more recent Dalit writings in Marathi and Kannada, as well as influenced by radical Afro-American literature, this movement was started in West Bengal in the 1990s. The main vehicle that steered this movement forward was the Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha (Bengali Dalit Literary Society), established in 1992 by Swapan Kumar Biswas. It had its first *Sangiti* or annual conference on 5–6 December 1992 at a village called Bhayna near Bogula in Nadia district.<sup>78</sup> 'The dalit literature and cultural movement is nothing but ... a counter-institutional operation', meant to 'demolish cultural hegemony prevailing in the country', writes Monohar Mouli Biswas, a Dalit writer who was once a refugee and became the President of the Sanstha in 2013–15.<sup>79</sup> 'For the dalit writers', says Manoranjan Byapari, another Dalit refugee author, 'recording the agony is not an end in itself, it is part of their movement for change.'<sup>80</sup> According to Jatin Bala, another stalwart of this movement and also an erstwhile refugee, the Bengali Dalit literature represents five fundamental aspects of Dalit life: 'Suffering', 'Revolt', 'Negation' (of Brahmanical system), 'Ethnic discovery' (or discovery of Dalit identity), and 'Creation' (of a new Dalit present and future).<sup>81</sup>

This movement spreads its message through numerous 'little magazines', or popular literary publications subscribed to by ordinary Dalit readers. The Sanstha has two official periodicals: the Bengali periodical *Chaturtha Duniya* was launched in 1994; eventually it



became a powerful publishing house, bringing out rich literature on Dalit thoughts and life experiences. In 1997, an English magazine called *Dalit Mirror* was started. The movement's main targeted audience remained the ordinary and rural Dalit population, and for that reason, the Sanstha organises its annual Sangitis in villages in the interior of different districts having large concentrations of Dalit population. And in these conferences 'lectures and discussions are held to raise awareness of local dalit populations about dalit history, issues and struggles.'<sup>82</sup>

In short, this literary movement is for Dalit self-assertion and recovery of their distinctive Dalit identity. This literature not only reminisces about their refugee past, but also valiantly introduces the caste question and issues of social justice into the public discourses in West Bengal.<sup>83</sup> As Meenakshi Mukherjee has noted, for a long time there was a 'collective reluctance' of the *bhadralok* literary establishment to take notice of this literature.<sup>84</sup> It is only recently that scholarly research on this genre has begun.<sup>85</sup> In September 2020, this literary movement received formal official recognition in the formation of a Dalit Sahitya Academy by the Government of West Bengal, with Manoranjan Byapari in the Chair.<sup>86</sup> Any further discussion of this literary movement, however, remains outside the purview of this book; we only seek to draw the attention of readers and future researchers to this new cultural movement that has been helping Bengali Dalit refugees to rediscover their Dalit selfhood in recent years. It is certainly a cognitive area that needs recognition and more in-depth research.

There is no denying that organised SC movement lost much of its steam in post-colonial West Bengal. We do not claim that Partition was the only reason behind it, but it was certainly one of the prime factors. The temporary disappearance of caste protests did not mean an end to caste-based discrimination. Otherwise, there would not have been such a forceful renewal of the SC movement at the turn of the present century. This revitalisation owed much to the MM and the Dalit literary movement. In recent years, however, both these movements have gone through many ups and downs, challenges, and fissures. We leave that story for other researchers to tell.

<sup>1</sup> Manosanta Biswas, *Banglar Matua Andolon: Samaj, Sanskriti, Rajneeti (The Matua Movement of Bengal: Society, Culture, Politics)*, Kolkata, Setu Prakasani, 2016, 291, 294.

<sup>2</sup> Swati Sengupta Chatterjee, *West Bengal Camp Refugees: Dispersal and Caste Question 1950–1965*, Kolkata, Sreejoni, 2019, 19.

<sup>3</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 2 January 1964.

<sup>4</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 5 January 1964.

<sup>5</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 6,7, 9, 15 January 1964.

- 6 *Census of India*, 1941, vol. I, Part I, Table XVI, 118–19.
- 7 Telegrams dt. 18 August, 23 August, 21 August 1947, 9 October 1948, IOR: L/P&J/7/12465: Boundary Commission: Miscellaneous Petitions Etc. on Award.
- 8 *Census of Pakistan*, 1951, Provisional Tables of Population, Census Bulletin No. 1, Table 6.5.
- 9 Paper cutting: *Daily Telegraph*, dt. 10 March 1964, IOR: MSS.Eur.158/106.
- 10 Confidential Report on India for March 1964, IOR: MSS.Eur.158/306.
- 11 Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947–1967*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, 112.
- 12 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 8 January 1964.
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- 14 Udit Sen, *Citizen Refugee: Forging the Indian Nation After Partition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, 158.
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- 18 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 30 August, 11 September 1964.
- 19 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 24 September 1964.
- 20 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 8 March, 13 March, 14 March 1964.
- 21 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 21 September 1964. For Gupta’s critique of the DDA, see Saibal Kumar Gupta, *Dandakaranya: A Survey of Rehabilitation*, ed., Alok Kumar Ghosh, Calcutta, Bibhasa, 1999.
- 22 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 1 November, 7 November 1964
- 23 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 3 November, 7 November 1964.
- 24 For details, see *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 10 January, 11 January, 16 January 1964.
- 25 IB, F. No. 29/26, Page No. 232-31; Copy of meeting report dt. 28 March 1964, IB, F. No. 353/24, WBSA. Also see, Biswas, *Banglar Matua Andolan*, 294–95.
- 26 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 11 March and 15 March 1964.
- 27 Extract from SBDN dt. 4 February 1964; DSM; ‘*Goponiyo karyabibaran, sthan: Dakshin Kolikata anchal, tang Ing 2/4/64*’, IB, S. No. 288/46, F. No. 820/46, WBSA.
- 28 Copy of meeting report dt. 28 March 1964, IB, S. No. 288/46, F. No. 820/46; ‘A Note on Shri Pramatha Ranjan Thakur ... of Thakur Colony, P.S. Gaighata, 24-Parganas’, IB, F. No. 2076-50, WBSA.
- 29 Note sheet, dt. 22 May 1964, IB, F. No. 2076-50, WBSA. Also see *Jugantar*, 20 April, 1 May 1964.
- 30 From Dy. Inspector General of Police, IB, West Bengal to Dy. Secy., Home (Spl.) Dept., 5 June 1964, IB, F. No. 2076-50, WBSA.
- 31 Kapil Krishna Thakur, ‘Dalits of East Bengal: Before and After the Partition’, in B. Chatterjee and D. Chatterjee, eds., *Dalit Lives and Dalit Visions in Eastern India*, Kolkata, Centre for Rural Resources, 2007, 31.
- 32 Interview with Gyanendranath Halder, Calcutta, dt. 20 June 2013.
- 33 Biswas, *Banglar Matua Andolan*, 297.
- 34 For more on his election campaign and death, see Dwaipayan Sen, *The Decline of the Caste Question: Jogendranath Mandal and the Defeat of Dalit Politics*

in Bengal, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, 260–63.

<sup>35</sup> Election Commission of India, Key Highlights of the General Election of 1957 to the Legislative Assembly of West Bengal, 9; Election Commission of India, Key Highlights of the General Election of 1962 to the Legislative Assembly of West Bengal, 5; IBN Politics.com: <http://ibnlive.in.com/politics/electionstats/constituency/1967/>, accessed on 18.4.2010; ‘Matua Mahasanghatipati Sri Sri Pramatha Ranjan Thakur-er Sankshipta Jibanpanjee’, *Matua Mahasangha Patrika*, 62, 2 November 2009, 5.

<sup>36</sup> The CPI was split in 1967 with the creation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI(M).

<sup>37</sup> Sen, *Citizen refugee*, 146–58.

<sup>38</sup> Madhumita Mazumdar ‘Dwelling in Fluid Spaces: the Matuas of Andaman Islands’, in Clare Anderson, Madhumita Mazumdar, and Vishvajit Pandya, *New Histories of the Andaman Islands: Landscapes, Place and Identity in the Bay of Bengal, 1790–2012*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016, 170–200; Carola Erika Lorea, ‘Contesting Multiple Borders: Bricolage Thinking and Matua Narratives on the Andaman Islands’, *Southeast Asian Studies*, 9:2, August 2020, 231–76

<sup>39</sup> Gupta, *Dandakaranya*; Alok Kumar Ghosh, ‘Bengali Refugees at Dandakaranya: A Tragedy of Rehabilitation’, in Pradip Kumar Bose, ed., *Refugees in West Bengal: Institutional Practices and Contested Identities*, Calcutta, Calcutta Research Group, 2001, 106–23; the desertion figures are from 117. The following paragraph, unless otherwise indicated, is from these two sources.

<sup>40</sup> The quotations in this paragraph are from Gupta, *Dandakaranya*, 13, 15, 18, 32, 37, 52.

<sup>41</sup> For more discussion on conditions in Dandakaranya, see Gyanesh Kudaisya, ‘Divided Landscapes, Fragmented Identities: East Bengal Refugees and Their Rehabilitation in India, 1947–79’, *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 17:1, 1996, 24–39.

<sup>42</sup> The Marichjhanpi incident was first brought to the notice of the academic community by Ross Mallick through his powerful article, ‘Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and Marichjhapi Massacre’, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 58:1, February 1999, 105–9. Since then, several articles have appeared revealing various startling aspects of this incident. Marichjhanpi massacre has also been fictionalised by Amitav Ghosh in *The Hungry Tide*, Boston, New York, A Mariner Book, 2005. Here we reconstruct the story of Marichjhanpi from these secondary sources.

<sup>43</sup> The letter is reproduced in Jhuma Sen, ‘Reconstructing Marichjhapi: From Margins and Memories of Migrant Lives’, in Urvasi Butalia, ed., *Partition: The Long Shadow*, New Delhi, Zubaan, 2015, 107–9.

<sup>44</sup> This meeting was reported in Raipur dailies; see Sen, ‘Reconstructing Marichjhapi’, 109. According to the testimony of Manoranjan Byapari, this announcement took place at a meeting in Mana refugee camp on that same date. See Anindita Ghoshal, *Refugees, Borders and Identities: Rights and Habitat in East and Northeast India*, London and New York, Routledge, 2021, 192.

<sup>45</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika* 15 April 1978, in Mandal, *Marichjhanpi, Udbastu*, 105.

<sup>46</sup> The statement is reproduced in Soumya Sankar Bose, *Where the Birds Never Sing*, New Delhi, Author, 2020, 60–61.

<sup>47</sup> Nilanjana Chatterjee, ‘Midnight’s Unwanted Children: East Bengali Refugees and the Politics of Rehabilitation’, Unpublished PhD thesis, Brown University, 1992, 295.

98 *Anandabazar Patrika* 15 April 1978, in [Mandal, Marichjhanpi, Udbastu](#), 104–5.

49 Chatterjee, ‘Midnight’s Unwanted Children’, 338–41; Annu Jalais, ‘Dwelling on Morichjhanpi: When Tigers became “Citizens”, Refugees “Tiger-Food”’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 23 April 2005, 1759.

50 See for example, Jyoti Basu’s statement in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly on 2 January 1959; also see [Chapter 4](#).

51 This is what UCRC leader Anil Singha told Babul Kumar Pal. See Babul Kumar Pal, *Barisal theke Dandakaranya: Purbabanger krishijibi udbastur punarbashaner Itihas* (From Barisal to Dandakaranya: Rehabilitation of the agriculturist Refugees of East Bengal), Kolkata, Mitram, 2010, 121. Also see Subhasri Ghosh, ‘In Search of “Home”: Dandakaranya and East Bengali Migrants, 1957–1977’, *Südasiens-Chronik—South Asia Chronicle*, 7, 2017, 112.

52 Sen, ‘Reconstructing Marichjhapi’, 119–20.

53 [Bose, Where the Birds Never Sing](#), 74.

54 *Anandabazar Patrika*, 8 February 1979; *The Statesman*, 17 May 1979, in Madhumoy Pal, ed., *Marichjhanpi: Chinno Desh, Chinna Itihas* [Marichjhanpi: Divided Country, Divided History], Kolkata, Gangchil, 2016, 81–83.

55 *Jugantar*, 17 May 1979, in [Mandal, Marichjhanpi: Udbastu](#), 109; also see Deep Halder, *Blood Island: An Oral History of the Marichjhapi Massacre*, Noida, HarperCollins, 2019, 105–15.

56 *Anandabazar Patrika*, 13 April 1978, in [Mandal, Marichjhanpi: Udbastu](#), 112.

57 Letters, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 14 May 2005, 2010.

58 [Halder, Blood Island](#), 20, 146–47, 155–56.

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60 Jalais, ‘Dwelling on Morichjhanpi’, 1759.

61 Chatterjee, ‘Midnight’s Unwanted Children’, 300, 303; Mallick, ‘Refugee Resettlement’, 111, 114.

62 [Gupta, Dandakaranya](#), 9.

63 P.K. Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal*, Calcutta, Naya Udyog, 1999, 181.

64 Ghosh, ‘In Search of “Home”’, 115.

65 Debdatta Chowdhury, ‘Space, Identity, Territory: Marichjhapi Massacre, 1979’, *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 15:5, 2011, 668–69.

66 See Chatterjee, ‘Midnight’s Unwanted Children’, 291–379; [Mallick, ‘Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves’](#); 107–19; Jalais, ‘Dwelling on Morichjhanpi’, 1758–60.

67 [Halder, Blood Island](#), 96–97.

68 [Chowdhury, ‘Space, Identity, Territory’](#), 668.

69 Quoted in Chatterjee, ‘Midnight’s Unwanted Children’, 356.

70 [Halder, Blood Island](#), 153, 160.

71 Chatterjee, ‘Midnight’s Unwanted Children’, 299, 320.

72 ‘A note on Shri Pramatha Ranjan Thakur ... of Thakur Colony’, P.S. Gaighata, 24-Parganas, IB, F. No. 2076-50, WBSA.

73 See several petitions in IB, F. No. 2076-50, WBSA.

74 For history and philosophy of the Matua sect, see Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872–1947*, Second edition, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011, 35–54; Manosanto Biswas, *Banglar Matua Andolon: Samaj, Sanskriti, Rajneeti* (The Matua Movement of Bengal: Society, Culture, Politics), Kolkata, Setu Prakasani, 2016;

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<sup>75</sup> See MM publications such as *Matua Matobad o Sree Sree Hari-Guru-Chand Thakur* (2008); *Matua Mahasangher 23tama Barshik Sammelan, Kendriya Karya-nirbahee committeer pakshe Sadharan Sampadaker Pratibedan* (2009); and *Matua Mahasangher Sangbidhan* (n.d.). However, as the Gen. Secy. of the MM admits, these are approximate numbers as they do not have proper membership records. Interview with Ganapati Biswas, Gen. Secy., MM, Thakurnagar, 10 January 2010.

<sup>76</sup> Mazumdar 'Dwelling in Fluid Spaces', 188–96.

<sup>77</sup> This electoral politics of the MM has been discussed in detail in Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 267–72. Also see Praskanva Sinharay, 'Building Up the Harichand–Guruchand Movement: The Politics of the Matua Mahasangha', in U. Chandra, G. Heirstad, and K.B. Nielsen, eds., *The Politics of Caste in West Bengal*, New Delhi, London, New York, Routledge, 2016, 147–68.

<sup>78</sup> Jatin Bala, *Dalit Sahitya Andolan (Dalit Literary Movement)*, Kolkata, Chathurta Duniya, 2002, 62.

<sup>79</sup> Manohar Mouli Biswas, *Surviving in My World: Growing up Dalit in Bengal*, tr. and eds., Angana Dutta and Jaydeep Sarangi, Kolkata, Samya, 2015, 97–98.

<sup>80</sup> Manoranjan Byapari and Meenakshi Mukherjee, 'Is there Dalit writing in Bengali?', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42: 41, 13–19 October 2007, 4118.

<sup>81</sup> Bala, *Dalit Sahitya Andolan*, 67.

<sup>82</sup> Biswas, *Surviving in My World*, 100–4.

<sup>83</sup> For more discussion on this literary movement, see Byapari and Mukherjee, 'Is there Dalit writing in Bengali?', 4116–20; Manohar Mouli Biswas and Shyamal Kumar Pramanik, eds., *Satabarshe Bangla Dalit Sahitya [Hundred years of Bangla Dalit Literature]*, Kolkata, Chaturtha Duniya, 2011; Manohar Mouli Biswas, *Bangla Dalit Writer Writes Back*, ed., Jaydeep Sarangi, New Delhi, Author's Press, 2019.

<sup>84</sup> Byapari and Mukherjee, 'Is there Dalit writing In Bengali?', 4116.

<sup>85</sup> See for example, Sreya Chatterjee, 'Dialectics and Caste: Rethinking Dalit Life-Writings in the Vernacular, Comparing Dalit Narratives', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 53:2, 2016, 377–99; Sarbani Banerjee, 'Different Identity Formations in Bengal Partition Narratives by Dalit Refugees', *Interventions*, 19:4, 2017, 550–65; Rajat Roy, 'Namasudra Literature and the Politics of Caste', *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry*, 6:1, October 2019, 78–87.

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